

Psalm 32

Blessed is the one

whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

² Blessed is the one

whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent,

my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night

your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.^[a]

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you

and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you

while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

⁷ You are my hiding place;

you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule,

which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked,

but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

¹¹ Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;

sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted^[a] by the devil.² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^[a]"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"'He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'^[a]"

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'^[a]"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'^[a]"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

It is rather annoying, but the gospel writer Matthew is not writing the perfect material for a sermon at the beginning of Lent.

That doesn't mean we haven't all tried over the years to take the story of Jesus temptations and find something teachable. But Matthew isn't trying to teach us individually or us as a church by this account. He shows not the slightest inclination to be useful like that. He is introducing Jesus.

This account is NOT about us and whatever temptations we might face. It's about Jesus.

Matthew's audience is Jewish so in introducing Jesus he goes to greater lengths than any of the other gospels to emphasize Jesus Jewishness.

Take the emphasis on the 40 days. Noah spent 40 days on mount Ararat before opening a window and sending out the Raven...but it's much more likely the readers and listeners would think of Moses who spent 40 days and nights on mount Sinai in God's presence. Exodus 24.

And when Jesus quotes scripture to refute Satan's temptations he quotes Moses from Deuteronomy.

Throughout his writing Matthew gives Jesus many titles including royal ones, he preaches Jesus as a King like Moses who we don't think of as a king but first century Jews certainly did.

Matthew's only concern is to introduce the real Jesus and to reveal his character, his nature and his purpose.

So where does that leave us on the first Sunday of Lent?

I think it frees us from expecting some moral lesson and allows us to focus on the person of Jesus.

Jesus does not go for any self-advertisement. He frequently tells people he's healed to keep quiet about it. I don't think Jesus would be on social media.

He doesn't seem to go out of his way to persuade anyone, he doesn't go into long debates trying to win anyone over. He speaks directly - like to the woman caught in adultery 'go and sin no more' or he gives an open invite 'follow me' but doesn't try and persuade possible followers.

When the disciples want Jesus to stay in place because a crowd is gathering, he wants to go somewhere else.

And Jesus doesn't always explain things and gets annoyed at times and angry at times.

He's also completely subversive. He has women followers.

He spends time with the lowest sort of people. He doesn't curry favour with the rich and powerful, he seems blind to power and status and wealth and sees into the heart.

He does go to the house of Zaccheus who was wealthy and powerful, but he also talks to the woman at the well who was lonely and in relationship number six He meets with both because of their need not because of status.

What does this mean for us at the beginning of Lent?

I think the Gospel of Matthew which is unhelpful to the preacher is helpful to the follower because we can see Jesus more clearly.

He is Jewish through and through. He is revealed to us alongside historic characters like Noah and Moses, so he's not going to be a footnote in history.

His way of dealing with the very specific temptations thrown at him was to quote the book of Deuteronomy written by Moses.

So is there anything we can learn from the temptation story?

Perhaps it's to note that the church has fallen to these temptations from time to time.

The church that promises a personal miracle for all who need one. I DO believe in miracles, but it would be wrong to advertise that they are frequently available to all who need one this week.

The church that makes Jesus into a super-hero who consequently provides frequent miracles for those who need one this week.

And lastly, the church that likes to be in control and have power and authority and get alongside political power in order to influence.

The church doesn't have a great track record with these temptations.

Jesus resisted the temptations thrown at him so that when the final temptation came 'if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross' he was able to resist.

In Matthew chapter 16 Jesus is explaining to his disciples that he must suffer at the hands of the elders and chief priests and teachers of the law, he must be killed and on the third day he would be raised to life.

This did not suit Peter at all, and he takes Jesus aside and says this will never happen to you.

Peter wants Jesus to be what he wants him to be and Jesus rebukes him and says get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, you aren't concerned with the things of God but your own concerns.

Then Jesus says

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life²⁵ will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

The story of Jesus temptation is the denial of self. Putting comfort, fame, status and power before honouring God – it turns out there is a lesson there for us after all!!

Lent is an invitation to be open to the real Jesus and if we can allow ourselves to see Him more clearly, perhaps we will find we see ourselves more clearly, the way Zacchaeus and the woman at the well were able to.

I said earlier that we must avoid the temptation to promise miracles, a super-hero saviour, that fame and success can be ours.

There was a line in the liturgy we used at the Ash Wednesday evening service from the Iona community which has that subversive, quiet invitation, capturing something of the real Jesus I've been speaking about.

'Then just when we think we've got it right as to where we should go and what we should do, just when we're ready to take on the world you come, like a beggar to our back door saying, this is the way. I am the way. And offering us bread and wine.'

When we look away from the temptations that would feed our ego and we look at Jesus as he is and not as we would want him to be, then we have clarity, and listening and following becomes central and not peripheral.

And I think that's what Matthew would want as an outcome of his Gospel.

Let us pray.

May we see Jesus more clearly.

In seeing, may our love and experience of him grow.

As they grow may we be transformed.

In being transformed, may we reveal him more clearly to those still blinded by self and ego, comfort fame and ease.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 22 February 2026