

**Lent 1**

**26 February 2023**

**Sung Eucharist, Worcester Cathedral**

Matthew 4. 1-11

Each year the producers of the Oxford English Dictionary choose their word of the year – a word which has attracted a lot of attention over the past twelve months for whatever reason. In the life of Worcester Cathedral one word stands out and that word, appearing as it does in today's gospel reading, has stuck in my mind all week since I looked at today's scriptures.

The problem is that although the word *pinnacle* features prominently in my mind, and likewise for those connected with the cathedral since one fell during Storm Arwen in November 2021, the pinnacle in today's second temptation of Jesus takes a very small role in presenting the meaning of the scene which is set before us. All that is required for us to understand this temptation is that Jesus is taken up to a very high place atop the temple in the holy city of Jerusalem.

And so the image of a pinnacle, so engrained in our minds as a spirelet, morph into the image in the gospel of the top of a steep wall above a valley, such that anyone throwing themselves off will most certainly seriously hurt themselves or worse. It is the height and the place which are important – not, sadly, the style of architecture.

Nevertheless, just as pinnacles have become the word of the year for many of us, so this one word has become the word of the week as I have thought about what to say this morning. Distractions are attractive by nature and this word has distracted me for too long. What might I say about a pinnacle, the pinnacle, with any great depth or inspiration as we worship together on the first Sunday of Lent?

Well I can share some of what I have discovered - but none of it will provide much fruitful sermon material. Much as the pinnacle has taken up the time and energy of so many teams across the cathedral this past year, so this word has taken away my time. The word doesn't even appear in many translations: sometimes the Greek word is translated as parapet, in other versions it is replaced with 'a high place'. But the mere mention of a pinnacle has distracted me.

Distraction is a plague for all of us. Some of you might have a stronger will to remain focussed but not me. I can be distracted easily and I enjoy meandering into daydreams, or side streets, veering off down an enticing pathway, or finding escape in matters which are less pressing. Distractions are attractive.

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Jesus' forty days in the wilderness are presented to us as we begin Lent with their clear resonance with the penitential days which stretch before us as we look to Easter. We begin on this first Sunday by hearing the temptations of Jesus which, like the eponymous hymn, have shaped our understanding of these forty days and forty nights. Lent is synonymous with resisting temptation. It is for this reason that our first foray into Lent as children is the giving up of all that tempts and delights us in chocolate, sugar, and high calories.

Temptations, like distractions, are attractive; if they weren't they would not be tempting. Jesus is tempted by what look to us to be attractive distractions – attractive because they provide those things which, we are told, human beings crave: power, possessions, profit. Distractions, because they are offered to Jesus at his time of trial: alone, hungry, in the depth of his wilderness experience. In the wilderness, viewed as we see it as a place of isolation and loneliness, the offer of food and strength, seem very distracting pleasures.

But Jesus is not alone. He, like us, is never alone: Jesus is with his Father. We – in every wilderness, temptation, and place of seeming abandonment, are not alone. Our Father is with us. But we get distracted by the attractive, and we fall prey to all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, as the Litany reminds us. But Jesus remains in the presence of the Father and is not alone. In our darkest hour we may feel alone but these verses of the Gospel bring us back into the never-failing presence of our Father. We are not alone.

And neither are we alone in temptation. If we look back to the opening verses of the gospel reading we hear that Jesus is 'led up by the Spirit'. It is God who *leads* Jesus. We imagine the leading of a child by than hand, or we imagine the way a shepherd might lead sheep by driving a herd across a field. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. The Holy spirit leads Jesus to be tempted; tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. What sort of God leads us into temptation? Surely this is the very opposite of all we believe and conceive about God?

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Every day in our prayers we ask God that he will lead us not into temptation. The Lord's Prayer is important, not just because it is the prayer which Jesus gives to us as his disciples, but because it contains within it petitions for the most fundamental, basic, and sharpest needs of our lives: that God's will be done, his kingdom come, our daily bread provided for, sins forgiven, and a heart ready to forgive.

Asking that we are delivered from temptation is a plea as basic as any of the others – our human condition with its weakness and hunger for more is prone to temptation. The serpent ensured that temptation is part of our life: from the moment of reason, the consciousness of free-will, we are tempted. In fact temptation can be seen as one of those things which makes us more fully human; shaping and forming us as we navigate life in all its fullness.

Which is why we need to look closely at the word temptation. Some versions of the Lord's Prayer do not translate the original text with 'lead us not into temptation', but have instead 'save us from the time of trial' and, in this different wording, we begin to understand not only our own journey through temptation, but also the purpose of Jesus' time in the wilderness. Temptation is a trial, a testing; and a testing is a strengthening and raw confrontation with the powers of good and evil.

Our temptation by a cream cake is of little importance, but our temptation by the deceit and corruption of power, money, and greed is a different matter altogether. This is the test from which we cannot escape, but for which we seek the immeasurable strength of God's grace to resist and fight. In these forty days in the wilderness, Jesus is tested and tried – shown the glamour of power and travelling the path of human reality which we walk every day. 'Lead us not into temptation' we pray, not because we believe God will actively pull us under, but that we know that the inevitability of life's path will bring us face to face with evil and we plead for God's grace and strength to withstand, resist, and overcome it.

The pinnacle with which I began this sermon was a distraction – a cream-cake enticing me to consider something of no importance. But in doing so I took myself up to that pinnacle and saw the view. I imagined the temple parapet, the high point from which the devil goads Jesus to jump. Allow me to share something else about this pinnacle. The word used in the Greek literally means 'little wing'. There is a small beauty in the contrast of this little wing and the impossibly huge wings which might be needed to jump from such a height. And yet it is the shadow of God's wings which prevent us from falling or arrogantly assuming our own wings. The pinnacle is, perhaps also a safe place.

Last year I looked through a camera focused on one of the pinnacles and saw a young peregrine sitting: perched (uneasily to my human eye), surveying the landscape but safe, secure, and confident on its high ledge. This pinnacle – with all its precariousness, loftiness, and temptations might not be where we choose to be, but it is often where we are sent or led. We cannot avoid the trials of life, we cannot escape the tests which beset us.

Temptation is all around us and it is an inevitable ingredient of life. But our life is not isolated from the life of God. If temptation is all around us, then so is love. For God is with us on the pinnacle, in the wilderness, and at every trial, test, and temptation. The moment of temptation has no power over the one who sends his angels to watch over us: the moment of temptation is the moment of God's triumph in which he invites us to share.

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