

22nd February 2026 – Morning Service

Andy Haynes

Call to Worship: Psalm 32: 7

You are my hiding place; You will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

We follow that with a hymn of praise that speaks of spreading the wings of grace over us.

StF 88 – Praise to the Lord the Almighty

- 1) Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,
the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy
health and salvation!
All ye who hear,
Brothers and sisters, draw near,
Praise him in glad adoration.
- 2) Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper
thy work and defend thee;
Surely his goodness and mercy here
daily attend thee:
Ponder anew
What the Almighty can do,
Who with his love doth befriend thee.
- 3) Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,
Fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee,
Then to thy need
He like a mother doth speed,
Spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.
- 4) Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness
of sin is abounding,
Who, when the godless do triumph,
all virtue confounding,
Sheddeth his light,
Chaseth the horrors of night,
Saints with his mercy surrounding.
- 5) Praise to the Lord! O let all that
is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now
with praises before him!
Let the amen
Sound from his people again:
Gladly for aye we adore him.

Joachim Neander translated by Cathering Winkworth & Rupert E Davies

Opening Prayers (prepared by Liam Hodgetts – Local Preacher on note)

Lord, we have not come to sing hymns; we have not come to say prayers; we have not come to be with each other. We have come simply to worship; we have come to acknowledge your worth; we have come to offer adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and praise.

For you are Mighty. You are Wonder Counsellor. You are Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
You will bring justice. You will bring peace eternally, for you are our Father, Prince of Peace.

We give to you the things in our lives which are not as good as they can be. We own up to them and give you these things, so we no longer carry their weight. We ask to be washed clean, for our lives are less than perfect.

We thank you, Lord, for the call to each one of us, personally and by name. The call to discipleship; the call to service; the call to share the good news. Help us to respond to your call. We thank you that you call us as we are – full of doubt, faults, and sin. We are not saints, but your purpose continues for us, and your love endures forever.

Lord, listen to our songs, receive our prayers and enjoy your people being together – but these are only the means of our heartfelt praise and adoration as we worship you. Gladly – delightfully, enthusiastically, willingly, joyfully, passionately – let us forever and always adore you. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Our next hymn fits the theme of today's reading when it says we shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

StF 254 – Seek ye first

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| 1) Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia: | 2) Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia: |
| Ch) <i>Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,
Allelu-, Alleluia!</i> | 3) We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, Alleluia: |

Karen Lafferty © 1972 CCCM Music

Reading: Matthew 4: 1-11 (NIV)

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

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

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. '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."

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

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

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

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

Our hymn to follow that reading speaks of a Saviour who knows all our weakness, as He trod the earth before us, and was tempted and taunted as through the desert He did go.

StF 238 – Lead us heavenly Father, lead us

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| 1) Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
For we have no help but thee,
Yet possessing every blessing
If our God our Father be. | 2) Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us.
All our weakness thou dost know,
Thou didst tread this earth before us,
Thou didst feel its keenest woe;
Tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
Through the desert thou didst go. |
|---|---|

3) Spirit of our God, descending,
Fill our hearts with heavenly joy
Love with every passion blending,
Pleasure that can never cloy;
Thus provided, pardoned, guided,
Nothing can our peace destroy

James Edmeston

Sermon

Have you ever stopped to wonder how full of decisions life is? Every move of the way there are decisions to be made. Some of them small and insignificant, like what to have for dinner. Others more important, like where to go for your holiday. Some decisions are huge – like who do you marry and where do you work & live etc. But we are continually making choices, and God has given us the freedom to make those choices. We can choose whether we follow Him or reject Him for instance. However, there are consequences to the choices we make.

Jesus too was free to make choices, and today's reading is a very interesting part of the life of Jesus; it takes place before He starts His earthly ministry. And we can relate to this whole episode much better, if we replace Satan with mere thoughts. Or perhaps we should do it the other way round, and recognise the devil in some of the thoughts we have when we're tempted? However we choose to look at it, the point to make is that Jesus was tempted just the same as we are – and we have the freedom to choose right or wrong in every situation of temptation. We do have the example of Jesus though, to assist us in making the right decision in all circumstances.

At an Ecumenical Ash Wednesday service, as a sign of penitence, everyone received the ash cross on our foreheads with these words, echoing words spoken by God to Adam in Genesis 3:19, *'Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'* They were followed by these words; *'Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.'*

In the prayers that followed everyone knelt to utter these words:-

'From mischief and pride, vanity and hypocrisy, envy and hatred, malice and evil intent, good Lord deliver us. From sloth, worldliness, love of money and hardness of heart. Good Lord deliver us. From sins of body and mind, contempt for Your word, deceitfulness, desires of the flesh and work of the devil, good Lord deliver us!'

Useful words to ponder at times when we think, 'What if I do this? Nobody's going to notice.' Or...

'Well, if I do say derogatory things about her it's justified 'cos she deserves it.'

'One more lie can't make that much difference, can it?'

'It'll serve him right, 'cos I've warned him if he parks there one more time, I'm going to let his tyres down!'

You get the idea, don't you? The things that pass through our mind to justify the sins we're about to commit.

Well, hopefully after today's reading we can be a bit more like Jesus in our approach to temptation. The Rolling Stones had a song *'You'll never make a saint of me'* which I've quoted from before, because it amazes me of their knowledge of Bible characters. The first verse goes like this:

'Paul the persecutor was an evil sinful man.

Jesus hit him with a blinding light and then his life began.'

The next part says:

*'Augustine knew temptation, he loved woman, wine and song,
And all the special pleasures of doing something wrong.'*

Augustine was a Roman official born in AD354, who was part of the scene of Roman orgies and the like, up until his conversion to Christianity when he eventually became a Saint. And for some people, the deliberate choice they make leads them into all sorts of addictions as they search for so called pleasures – turning to drink or drugs and the like. But thankfully, there are many Christian organisations willing to help those who have fallen into the trap of making wrong choices and being left with the consequences. And it's right that this work goes on, not to judge them – for we are all guilty, be it on a different scale – but these people deserve the chance to turn things round, just as Jesus did with Saul on the Damascus Road, and just as Saint Augustine did in AD387, when he got baptised aged 33.

So, let's look at the choices Jesus had in today's reading. First of all, it's very true to say that if Jesus was tempted, then we too will be tempted during our lives. The second thing to observe is the timing of these temptations. It's no mistake that it was prior to the beginning of His very important ministry. Satan would not want this work to begin, so he was out to stop it! And if we've made a commitment to follow Jesus, Satan is also wanting to prevent that happening. We must beware of this, especially where new believers are concerned.

Jesus has such a lot to teach us in everything He does and says. So, notice that He endures a 40 day fast before beginning His important work on earth. This is commitment – going without in order to focus on God and the work of the kingdom – denying one's self for the greater cause. I often wonder where churches would be today if we had relied more on finding out what God's will is for us, and less on asking God's blessing on our own ideas. Well, Jesus is seeking to do the Father's will by the guidance of the Holy Spirit who led Him into the wilderness. We may think of this as being very strange. Why would God lead us to a wilderness to prepare us for the work he has for us to do? But it's often during those bleak times in our life that we learn the most about God and draw closer to Him – in times when there's no distractions! Plus, we only find out how strong our faith and commitment is during those times of testing!

So here we find Jesus fasting in the desert place, denying Himself physical food to build Himself up Spiritually ready for the work ahead. And that, of course, left Him physically hungry. Now don't forget that Jesus was there in the beginning of time, when God said in Genesis 1:26 *"Let us make mankind in our image..."* Paul also refers to Jesus in Colossians 1:16 *"...all things have been created through Him and for Him."* Therefore, we must conclude that Jesus has the power and authority to turn the stones around Him into bread. We have the perfect miracle of Jesus later on, which proves what He is capable of when he multiplies the bread of one boy's lunch to feed 5000 plus people. This is recorded for us in all four gospels!

Picture the scene in today's reading, Jesus hasn't eaten for forty days and is starving. He looks at the stones around his feet, they almost look like bread baps! He licks his lips, He can taste the delicious fresh baked bread. He can smell its sweet aroma, His stomach rumbles and He thinks 'I'm all alone here in the wilderness – no one would know, no one would see.' He could have been excused for thinking that it was only right to test out His miraculous powers before going public with them. What a great opportunity to turn these stones into bread!

But His heavenly Father sees all things – and if you make a commitment to God you should stick to it! This would have thrown His whole ministry into jeopardy. The Israelites were in the wilderness – not for 40 days, but for 40 years. This was due to their lack of faith and disobedience to God. A whole generation missed seeing the promised land because of it. During that time God fed them each day with manna from heaven. But they still grumbled and moaned.

We read these words in Deuteronomy 8:3, *"God humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you or your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* Jesus proves that knowing scripture is very helpful in assisting us making correct decisions and quotes this very passage to the tempter.

Next, the devil leads Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and tells Him to throw Himself off, proving He is the Son of God, because... (and now we see the subtle danger of Satan as in Matthew 4:6 he himself quotes scripture from Psalm 91) *"He will command His angels concerning you, and they will lift up their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."* Unbelievable that Satan has the nerve to quote scripture to try and trick Jesus. If Jesus was not immune to such treatment, how much more will we be susceptible to it? How many times do we hear scripture quoted out of context? How many times do we find false interpretations of what the Bible is saying? How many times do we twist things to suit what we want to hear? These are the dangers we need to be aware of and avoid at all costs so that our faith is not damaged by the subtleties of the devil's ways. But Jesus retaliates by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16 to Satan: *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."* Scripture is also our weapon against evil!

Finally, we move onto a type of Jesus that people hoped for and wanted to see – a Jesus that the Jews hoped would free Israel from Roman occupation. A worldly Jesus they desired. The temporary victor that wouldn't last. Here today, gone tomorrow. For we read in verses 8 & 9, *"Again the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give You' he said, 'If You will bow down and worship me."* And Jesus could have sided with Satan, turning His back on God, just as the fallen arch angel Satan had done himself; Jesus could have joined the godless darkness of the world. But it isn't Satan's to give – which just goes to prove that he can never ever be trusted! And any power Satan has over the globe is going to be short lived – for God is in control and Satan will one day be banished.

In the meantime, we should be aware of Satan's false promises – because he does offer us many worldly things that distract us from God's will. Look at the state of the world because of what Satan offers:-
You're in poverty, so steel what you like cos the worlds owes you.
Overindulge on alcohol, it will solve all your problems.
Ease the pain of life with these enhancing drugs.
You need not be afraid if you go everywhere armed with a knife!

But not everyone will fall for that, so he becomes more subtle when encouraging us to gossip, or to justify our sin, or to give up on praying and reading God's word. But in verse 10, Jesus answered by again quoting from Deuteronomy 6 *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only."* And it is through meeting together, both worshipping and serving God that helps us keep in tune with what is required as we seek the things of God, supporting one another in prayer and fellowship as we do so. We need to be sure of the foundation of our faith, and certain in what we believe, reading the Bible prayerfully so that God can speak to us through His word. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 3: 16-17, *"I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."* This should be our desire. This should be our need and our want, that Christ should live within us.

All this was the beginning of a crucial stage in the life of Jesus as He is about to begin His ministry. This time of testing was an important introduction to that ministry. The same has been true of many who are called by God for various tasks. Many great hymns have been written following a time of testing for their writers. It can also be true for us. For in many of life's difficult circumstances we find our faith tested but also find a blessing for ourselves and others as we remember the words of Paul in Romans 8:37, *"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."* If we give in to temptation it leads to more of the same. But James tells us that if we resist temptation, we conquer Satan in his attempt to de-rail us! James chapter 4:7 reminds us to *"Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."* It's what happens here in today's episode – Jesus resists the devil, and Matthew 4:11 tells us, *"Then the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him."*

So, we can overcome temptations with Jesus by our side, assisting us in all we say and do, being one with Him. I pray that this will be true for all of us as we continue in our Christian journey. Amen.

We sing of Jesus now; the name to sinners given, the name that bruises Satan's head, the name from which devils fear and fly.

StF 357 – Jesus the name high over all

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| 1) Jesus - the name high over all,
In hell, or earth, or sky!
Angels revere, and nations fall,
And devils fear and fly. | 4) O that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all the earth embrace. |
| 2) Jesus - the name to sinners dear,
The name to sinners given!
It scatters all their guilty fear,
It turns their hell to heaven. | 5) His only righteousness I show,
His saving grace proclaim;
'Tis all my business here below
To cry: 'Behold the Lamb!' |
| 3) Jesus - the prisoner's fetters breaks,
And bruises Satan's head;
Power into strengthless souls it speaks,
And life into the dead. | 6) Happy if with my latest breath
I might but gasp his name;
Preach him to all, and cry in death:
'Behold, behold the Lamb!' |

Charles Wesley

Prayers of Intercession (prepared by Liam Hodgetts – Local Preacher on note)

Heavenly Father, we come to you to pray for the world. A gift you have given us, which we should steward, but fail to do so in many ways. Give us wisdom to care for your creation as you intended us to do so. We pray for the leaders of this world – excite them with your love, and guide them toward wisdom, peace, justice, and integrity. We pray that they protect the vulnerable and make decisions for the common good. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray that the place we call home, wherever that may be, be filled with your love. Help the people there discover what it means to trust you. Where there is chaos, give them peace. Where there is loneliness, give them friendship. Where there is despair, give them light. Where there is success, give them grace. Where there is no faith, touch them, change them, heal them, so that they may know the living God. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We offer you prayers for each chapel in the Vale of Stour Circuit and local area. We pray for those places which face current difficulties. May we have faith and trust in the plans you have for us. We pray for the leadership of Ministers, lay workers, and volunteers, seen and unseen. May all that they do be done in love and to the glory of your name. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In a moment of silence, we bring to you the people known to us. (*Silence.*)

We particularly pray for those who can't be with us today, and the individuals on our prayer list at this time. You know their need. May you surround them with your love. We pray for those in hospitals, hospices and prisons, their families, and the people who care for them – the doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers... all those who feel burdened by their responsibilities. May they feel your presence as they navigate the struggles of life. Give them strength and the hope of knowing you. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

And Lord, we thank you that we can meet here together, to worship and serve you. We thank you that we can support one another, in prayer and fellowship. We ask that you keep us in tune with what is required as we seek the things of you. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

We conclude by singing of our suffering servant, scorned ill-treated, our Priestly King who defeated death to become enthroned forever – it's all in our last hymn.

StF 319 – Christ Triumphant

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| 1) Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing: | 3) Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the cross defeated,
Sinners justified: |
| Ch) <i>Yours the glory and the crown,
The high renown,
The eternal name!</i> | 4) Priestly king, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall never
Stifle hymns of love: |
| 2) Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By Your humble birth: | 5) So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon You gazing,
This shall be our song: |

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The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. **Amen.**