

# The Temptation of Jesus ...

*... what might it mean for us?*

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*A sermon given on the First Sunday of Lent, 26th February 2023 – by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

So, when I wrote this Tom and I were in the middle of watching the new BBC docudrama 'The Gold'. I can confirm now that we stayed up late and have finished watching it because it's very addictive. I don't know if any of you have seen it, but it's really worth a watch, I think. It's based on the true story of a group of six men who robbed Brink's Matt warehouse in the 1980 hoping for a little bit of jewellery or money and accidentally got away with three tonnes of solid gold. The tagline of the programme is, 'How do you dispose of three tonnes of pure gold?' Very slowly. But the focus of the story is not really on the robbery that happens right at the beginning, but it is on the impact of what trying to get rid of what was then £26 million worth of gold had on their lives. And what really struck me is how similar the themes are to those in 'The Lord Of The Rings', where that ring takes on this devastating power that very few can handle. The promise of incredible wealth and freedom ends up causing families to be separated, people to live in hiding, marriages to break down, and ultimately many lives lost as what became known as the curse of the Brink's Matt millions, as many of those whilst undetected by the police, ended up being shot through the criminal underworld. There's a powerful line that says the gold runs through your veins like poison.

And that's the focus of our reading this morning at the start of Lent. The promise of ultimate freedom and power comes with huge consequences. Jesus had just had his baptism in the River Jordan, where the power of the Holy Spirit had come upon him and Jesus and God himself had confirmed Jesus's status as his beloved son. Jesus is beginning his ministry and he literally has the power of the universe at his fingertips. But he knows the journey he has to go on. And it's very significant that his 40 days in the wilderness are marked by that very identity being challenged and the temptation to use that power for control and authority is offered to him repeatedly.

Echoing the Israelites 40 years wandering in the wilderness dependent on the bread, the manna from heaven, Jesus is first invited to satisfy his physical hunger to turn stones into bread. It would have been so easy, seemingly so harmless - you've done a 40 day fast, you deserve a sandwich. Why not recreate the manna? Prove again that you can do just

what God says you can do, who you are. Yet Jesus replies, *"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God."* So overcoming physical temptation, Jesus then faces the temptation to use his power in a dramatic and a sensational way. In view of Jerusalem, his ultimate destination, he's invited to throw himself off the top of the temple and to trust that God will send angels to catch him. I don't know how many of you were around when we were having the roof done here, but I was super envious of the guys who were right up on the top on the pinnacle of the roof (I probably wouldn't be in this weather) - the idea of being up so high just appealed entirely. As you can imagine for Jesus, quite what a media sensation it would have been if not only had he been up that high, but he'd jumped off and God had sent glorious angels to catch him. People would have been talking about it for years and years. Jesus resists the spotlight, calls out the temptation for what it is - a temptation to test God. And he moves on. And then the last and perhaps greatest temptation is to be shown the view of all the known kingdoms, all the people, all the power structures, and to be offered control over them all, simply in return for worshipping one who wasn't God. This has an echo back to Eden - had we been warm enough to have the first reading this morning, it would have been the temptation from the Garden of Eden - surely the fruit won't hurt anybody, you'll just gain more knowledge; surely God didn't mean that you would die; just trust me. Jesus responds, *"Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him."* And then the devil left him.

As we begin this season of Lent, we are invited to set aside these 40 days, to withdraw from some of the usual rhythms of life and to reflect. We do this collectively: through our music; our liturgy; the absence of flowers, the colours; the lack of allelujahs; we strip back to the basics. The cold seems somewhat appropriate in this season. But individually, however, I wonder if I might invite each of us, including myself, to spend some time considering the power that we hold, the gold that can tempt us to look inwards, to isolate ourselves from others rather than God. It's easy to say, 'Well, I don't have millions, it's not my problem.' But actually, each of us has things that we cling on tightly to.

Jesus's time in the wilderness prepared him for all that lay ahead. They weren't the only tests - they're set out clearly - but every day he faced the challenges to choose to give his power away, to take the nature of a servant, ultimately to lay down his life rather than to achieve glory by dominating force. The capacity to use his power to control and to get his own way would have always been there. Jesus was fully human: he was the true Adam who reversed the Garden of Eden; the true Israelite; the true manna from Heaven; the one without sin who brought restoration for us all.

And so how might we divest ourselves of all that stops us from being fully human? From the relationships that damage us and from our behaviours that we know damage others from time to time? From the addictions that control us or the habits that threaten to?

May we reflect on the way we speak to others, the way we treat those who have the least power in society or perhaps in our workplace? Let us consider how we spend our gold. Do our financial choices, our shopping trolleys empower people? Do they bear the planet in mind? What are we holding on to far too tightly that someone else needs? Would we be willing to risk our reputation to stand for justice, to walk with the least and the lost? Are we willing to prepare for those in the media spotlight who have those temptations magnified day by day?

May we, like Jesus, be willing to wrestle with the powers that appear so innocent, so shiny and seductive, and yet may ultimately destroy our peace?

May we be those who allow God to work in our hearts and minds, to bring us peace, to bring us greater freedom, to enable us to truly celebrate on that glorious day the risen and resurrected Lord Jesus.

# Reading Text

## Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' <sup>4</sup> But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." ' <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.