
Hymns: **238** “Lead us, heaven Father, lead us”
 235 “Christ our Redeemer knew temptation’s hour”
 503 “Love divine, all loves excelling”
 287 “When I survey the wondrous cross”

Readings: **1 Corinthians 1-13**
 Luke 4:1-13

“AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS.....”

Imagine two small boys living with their sickly mother in a shack; imagine them leaving their humble dwelling in the middle of a severe winter – the kind that saw windows frosted over in the night, water pipes bursting, and the frost or snow deep and crisp and even. These two boys each carrying a coarse sack. They’re foraging for fuel. Anything that will burn – driftwood from the beach, blocks of hardwood discarded at the engine sheds, scoops of “small coal” from someone’s tip – it all went gleefully and gratefully into those sacks. It was hard work and had to be done most days. Hypothermia was the alternative. There were days when we could find and scavenge almost nothing. And those were the days when I came to understand the first temptation of Jesus at a personal level. Our daily search involved weaving in and out of railway wagons, hundreds of them in serried ranks, just about all of them loaded with coal, wonderful anthracite coal, mined in the nearby Gwendraeth valley and ready to be shipped out at the docks. Here we were, desperate for fuel, walking and crawling by all this gleaming carboniferous answer to our needs. Who’d miss a handful or two? I could keep watch while Jim, my brother, climbed onto one of the trucks. He could throw down a few pieces, they’d be in my sack before you could blink twice, and off home we’d go rejoicing. “If your need is as bad as you say it is, you could turn these chunks of stone into house-warming fuel” thus spake the devil, over and over again, to those two boys. Once and once only did they yield to the lucubrations of the devil. But when their mother saw what they’d come home with, she gave them a right beating, told them to take the offending lumps of coal back. “It’s not just a warm place to live that we need” she insisted, “we have our self-respect to think of too.”

Those events at the beginning of my life helped me to understand just what constitutes a desert. I know that, in the case of Jesus, it’s the sandy, featureless, unproductive land that stretches out in a seemingly endless vista. The desert is a place to get lost in, a merciless place, dry and parched, not fit for human life. Jesus entered the Judean wilderness and, in doing so, he took his life in his own hands. You have to have great inner resource, a strong mental framework, a capacity to focus on your survival if you dare to test yourself against its rigours. And that’s what Jesus did in the 40 days he spent in the desert.

But the desert isn’t only a matter of sand and scrub. There are deserts that bear little resemblance to that kind of topographical phenomenon. Those days of abject poverty which we suffered in my boyhood were real desert years. But it isn’t only

poverty that creates a desert. When life is squeezed empty of meaning, when relationships perish, when the sound of laughter is no longer heard, when your children say they hate you, when your business collapses, when you hear a fateful diagnosis, or when you suffer at the hands and mouths of gossip-mongers – you'll know exactly what a desert is. Or if your money, something you've worked for and longed for and planned for, simply becomes a drug just like any other addictive substance, and you wake up one day knowing that there's more to life than money, or the stuff that money can buy and that you may have left things too late to find it – that's another desert.

A desert of any kind will test us – as the Judean desert tested Jesus. It will force us to simplify our lives, to de-clutter, to slim down, to get rid of useless vanities.

Along the way, at some stage in our time in the desert, we'll catch sight and sound of those mirages, fictions of our struggling minds, projections of some deep longing, pure fantasies that lure us into dangerous territory and the hands of the devil.

I can hear him talking now. “There you are Jesus, you're always going on about your so-called kingdom. Take a look at that (a wave of his arm). All the kingdoms you could possibly want. Just come with me and they're yours for the taking.”

The temptation that's hardest to resist is the one that is pitched in terms of real hopes you may have, real gifts in your possession. It plays on something that's absolutely part of you and suggests avenues you can travel along where you end up over-playing your hand. A thirsty person longs for water and the mirage taunts him with a picture of water, lots of water. A successful business man/woman is tempted to take one step too far, to build bigger barns and to sow the seeds of future failure. Someone competent with accounts is tempted to use his skill to syphon his employer's finances into his own corrupt hands. A brilliant athlete is tempted to enhance his or her already considerable abilities by taking a banned substance. A loving parent becomes too controlling of their child. Icarus loved flying but flew too close to the sun.

The mirage morphs. But we can all recognise the danger. It's God alone we should worship – not success or money or fame or power. We need a point beyond the objectives of our daily lives against which we can measure and evaluate the things we strive for. God and God alone is to be served.

Things get near the limit when Jesus is taken to the top of the temple and urged to pitch himself over into the abyss. “Your special attendants will see to it you don't perish”, said the devil. This is a pernicious moment with particular relevance for our own times.

The temple is the repository of the wisdom of the ages. It was not without its faults – Jesus pointed them out often enough. Its officers were not without their faults – Jesus pointed those out too. But, for all that, it was where history, vocation, culture, tradition and teaching were focussed. It was where the nation's very identity was focussed. “Throw yourself off the temple” was an invitation to take action outside the system, to make the irrelevance of the past and tradition and custom crystal clear.

It's as if he were being tempted to prove and show that the temple was yesterday's story and that he was offering something brand new, from left field, out of this world.

Something else? And what might that be? A piece of magic, that's what. To be caught in mid-air by a bunch of angels would certainly have been spectacular if it could be done. What crowds Jesus could expect once he'd done that. Just imagine.

It seems to me that we're living in an age when people are fed up with our systems of governance. We're tired of endless negotiations, factious peace agreements, dysfunctional world bodies and agencies, untrustworthy politicians. As if in response to this malaise, all over the place we see the leaders rising up who are jumping off the temple, leaping into thin air, calling attention to themselves as they cut their dash. Unshackled by previous conventions, coming from somewhere outside "the system", they claim a freedom to lash out at others, to ignore established ways of doing things. They act with abandon. They ignore the time-honoured definition of politics as "the art of the possible," preferring instead to suggest that they stand for a politics better understood as "the art of the impossible." And people seem to love it. Are we on the verge of another age of dictators, totalitarian leaders? The people fully expect angels to rush in to ensure that these daring and darling exponents of a new art don't destroy themselves. These are dangerous times.

We are certainly hearing people speak like noisy gongs banging symbols. And our leaders too often claim to have all sorts of powers, to understand mysteries, to be able to move mountains. They should be careful lest they give into the ultimate test posed by the desert times we live in – the temptation to portray themselves as magicians, as having powers no-one else possesses.

I began with a story of two boys. Let me end with one too. Those boys so wanted to please their mother. There was a time between the breakdown of her health when she had to leave her work in the factory and the arrival of National Assistance (welfare). Those were our desert years. Sometimes it was keeping warm that proved to be our biggest worry. At others it was hunger. There wasn't enough food to put on the table and, especially in school holidays, this often reached a critical point. To bring a smile to our mother's face, we thought up a wheeze - a delightfully simple solution. We'd beg for money. And so we did – urging and pleading people (all of whom knew us well enough) to give us a few pennies. We reached the princely sum of £3 and took it home with great delight. Our mother's response can never be forgotten. She was so angry with us. Once more we received the wrong side of her hand and the wrong end of her tongue. She knew that these spontaneous responses to our immediate needs, however urgent, must never be at the expense of our ability to hold up our heads in public and to maintain the respect of our neighbours.

In those days, we children saw through a glass darkly. We knew only in part. We spoke like children, thought like children and reasoned like children. But now that I'm a man, I can see so clearly how it was our mother's love, tough love, that sometimes stood between us and the dissolution of our lives as we scrambled for solutions to our problems.

And so, on a day (St Valentine's Day) when we rejoice at the romantic love that has brought so many young couples into this church for marriage and which continues to bless them and inspire them day by day, we think too of that other love that the scripture talks about. This love, in a more excellent way, is the love that envisages the well-being of others and settles for the self-sacrifice and the discipline that will ensure the victory of that love.

May it be ours today and forever.

Amen.