

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February – Keeping God at the Centre

Genesis 2;15-17, 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

*exercise where (probably younger members of the congregation) are invited to the front for a game to keep their eyes fixed on God.*

That exercise reminds me of the story of a young farmer who was learning how to plough a field. That might seem like a simple thing to do, but no matter how hard he tried he just couldn't get the lines straight. He looked at the field he had ploughed and then compared it to the one next to it which had been ploughed by his mentor – with all his experience and knowledge. There was no comparison.

So he went to his mentor and asked how he managed to plough such straight furrows.

Its easy, he said (don't you hate it when people say that!)

Just keep your eyes fixed on something in the distance and head towards it.

So our young man took the advice and set to. The field was finished so he stepped back to look at his work, but it was still all over the place. What were you looking at, asked his mentor.

I kept my eyes on that cow over there – the one in the next field.

Yes we need to keep ours eyes focussed in our lives – but not on things that move or are transient – rather on God himself.

And I think that is what the story in today's gospel is all about.

This story this comes immediately after the baptism of Jesus. We have just heard - and Jesus has just heard of course - the voice from heaven "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased". The same words as at the Transfiguration - as we heard last Sunday.

And then straight after those words, after his baptism Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted (or tested is another possible translation which might give a slightly different emphasis).

Led into the wilderness to be prepared for his mission. To make sure he has his focus right. To make sure that obedience to God and love for God are at the centre of who he is and what he does.

Many of us, I am sure, know the story well.

Jesus is hungry. He is tempted to turn stones into bread. We know this is something he could do – later in his life he feeds 5000 people with just a couple of loaves of bread. But is this what he should be doing? The key here is what precedes the temptation.

“if you are the Son of God” – the tempter sows a seed of doubt. Yes you have just heard those words at your baptism. But surely if they are true, God wouldn’t want you to be hungry.

The temptation here is to put his own physical needs, his own comfort as the first priority. But Jesus responds by quoting from Scripture – Bread alone is not what gives life. Life comes from the word of God. By what he says Jesus is stating loud and clear that God is at the centre of his life. His own needs, his own desires, come after that.

Then we hear those same words from the tempter again, once more sowing doubt, questioning his very nature. “If you are the Son of God.” This time Jesus’s thoughts turn to the Temple in Jerusalem. He is – presumably in his mind’s eye – standing on the pinnacle of the Temple. High above the crowds. If he leapt from here his loving Father would surely save him. And if that happened, surely the crowds would turn to him – his mission could be achieved all too easily. Words of scripture came to him from the tempter as he stood there – words that said that he would be protected by angels from God if he jumped.

But this, Jesus knows, would put fame and popularity at the heart of his life and mission – and so Jesus responds by again quoting from scripture. Do not put God to the test – don’t try to dictate what God should do for then you are putting yourself in the place that rightly belongs to God.

Its interesting, by the way, to fast forward to the Garden of Gethsemane. As he is arrested and as Peter strikes the high priest’s slave with his sword, Jesus tells him to put the sword away and says “do you not think I could appeal to my Father and he will at once send twelve legions of angels” . He knew the angels were within his power, but he knew too that to call them would be to take his eyes off God and what God was calling him to do.

And in the final of the three temptations Jesus has a vision of the whole world, and the thought that all this could be his so easily if only he listened to the voice – to the tempter’s words - if he misused his power; if he took his eyes off God; if his goal was fame and power. But once more Jesus turns to scripture. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”. The same message – keep God in his rightful place at the centre of all you are and all you do.

Again, its interesting that right at the end of Matthew’s gospel – after the cross and the resurrection - Jesus is again on a high place, a mountain prior to his ascension into heaven. This time he is with his disciples and he says to them “all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me”. Despite the tempter’s enticing words, real authority has come not from taking the easy route, but by keeping God at the centre and walking the way of the cross.

The temptations we face on a daily basis will no doubt be very different from those that Jesus faced, but in a sense they will also be very similar – at least in what they are trying to do.

Those temptations are not just trying to get us to “sin” in some way. They are trying to turn our eyes away from God. To remove God from his rightful place at the centre of who we are. To

replace the one true God with fame, money, self interest, self satisfaction or any manner of false gods.

Jesus was tempted, we recall, just after he was affirmed by God at his baptism. Maybe its worth remembering that we are often tempted to turn away from him not at the darkest points of our lives, but at those times when all seems well.

And one last thought – how can we stand up to such temptation. How can we ensure we keep ours fixed on God.

As he faced the tempter, Jesus used scripture. At every point he was able to respond with a word that came from the Bible. A word that helped him focus on God.

How well do you know the Bible? Are you able to use it in the way that Jesus did?

The Bible as we have it is not an easy book to read or to study, but for Christians it is a vital tool in our battle to keep focussed on God. Many of us are using the “Dust and Glory” Lent booklets, and will be talking about them at our Lent groups on Wednesday. Those booklets give us a short Bible reading for each day. The booklets themselves contain a verse or two from the passage suggested, but you will get most benefit if you look up in your Bible the entire passage suggested. If you don’t have a copy of the Bible in modern English that you can use, then please pick up one from the prayer chapel. I’d rather it be used in your home than it sit unread on the shelf there!

Reading something from the Bible each day is a good habit to get into and one to continue when Lent finishes. But where to start? If you would like to learn more, have a chat with one of us afterwards and we will try to point you in the right direction.

And finally a date for your diary – Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May – we will be spending the morning looking at the Bible. Its an updated rerun of a morning we led a few years back. We will give an overview of the Bible’s major story themes, we will talk about the different genres or types of writing, we will think about how it came to be in the form we have today and we will come up with some thoughts that might make reading it a bit easier and less daunting. And we hope the morning will help you to hear God speaking through it and encourage you to read it more. And perhaps than you will have more confidence to use it as you face up to the temptations of life.