

On Wednesday we began the season of Lent – the period from Ash Wednesday until the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. Over time the church has recognised the value of the Lenten disciplines for all believers during Lent, not just for a few preparing for baptism, in the hope that we all might strengthen our discipleship – that is our relationship with God and grow in trust and faith.

On Ash Wednesday – at the start of the service – the priest reads an invitation to our Lenten devotion. It reads:

*Brothers and sisters in Christ, since early days Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord's passion and resurrection and prepared for this by a season of penitence and fasting.*

*By carefully keeping these days, Christians take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.*

*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word<sup>1</sup>.*

I always find these words very moving, whether I am reading them – or listening to them. This invitation is so clearly about our journey together – our commitment to a process and our desire to be faithful to God. Lent is not about our individual journeys of faith, rather it about our shared journey and its relationship with our individual journey of faith.

The description which Moses provides for us in our reading from Deuteronomy is on the one hand a liturgy – it is a vision of the words and actions of a community – a vision of how the community (us) might imitate God.<sup>2</sup> It is a vision which is intended to inspire the people of God to be thankful, to recall their redemption in God; and in thankfulness for God's mercy to share with those who are more vulnerable. It is a powerful vision of faithfulness – and vision that strongly relates to the invitation given at the beginning of Lent to us.

We are called to imitate Christ – to be thankful for all that we have, to believe that the kingdom of God does and can exist on this earth – and we are called share what we have with those who have nothing – that is to feed the poor and bring liberty to those who are captive.

We say these words so often that sometimes we can become cynical that peace and justice are possible – or that the actions we take really do make any difference. Lent can be a good time for us to let go of any feelings of frustration and cynicism we might have and actually focus our faith back on believing and acting!

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<sup>1</sup> Ash Wednesday Liturgy – Presidents Introduction to Lent – Common Worship 2011 - <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/41155/tslent.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2761](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2761)

Moses got this right! We live in the words and in the actions – we cannot have one without the other. It is one of the reasons that I find the 40bags in 40 days such a helpful image and process. Sometimes the thing that we have to put in the bag is not a thing but an attitude – a frame of mind which stops us from believing that we can make a difference.

Words and actions both matter. Jesus knew that better than any of us. Our Gospel reading today is from Luke but it is one of three versions of the story of Jesus temptation the wilderness found in the Gospels. Luke's version of the story is much longer than in Mark, and has events in a slightly different order to Matthew. Luke also assumed that we know the story of the Baptism of Jesus and that Jesus has already been declared as God's son. The three temptations of Jesus are set in a wilderness, and they recall the testing of the people of Israel in the wilderness. Even the forty days of testing in the case of Jesus recalls the forty years of Israel's testing in the wilderness. But unlike his answers, Jesus is shown in this story to constantly remain faithful to God. You may have also noticed in the gospel reading that when Jesus quotes scripture, on all three occasions he quotes Deuteronomy. This forms another strong link with Moses and the link with the experience of Israel – and this link between word and actions. The author is helping us see that history matters, but that things are also changing.

The story of the temptations is always read on the first Sunday of Lent, it becomes for us a powerful image not only of Jesus, or our Lenten Journey, but of faith as a whole. On Wednesday we also used this story in our Ash Wednesday Service at Christ Church school. I was initially nervous about using this story with children I don't know very well – but I had underestimated them – they totally got. On Wednesday I introduced this story with a game of 'Simon Says'. Do we do what others tell us, whether it is Simon, or Satan, or God or a bully in the playground? I was amazed (in a good way) at the answer to these questions on Wednesday.

I was a helpful place for me too, to start reflecting on this story, but also in terms of the challenge to declutter and remove the things which distract us from faith. In the 40bags challenge we are invited to remove some items or clutter each day... but the story of the temptations moves our reflections sideways- what voices or distractions might we need to remove:

In the first challenge to Jesus – who is fasting – is told to turn a stone to bread – but Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" – recalling how Moses reminds the people of Israel that God tested them in the wilderness by hunger<sup>3</sup>, but he fed them with manna. In this distraction, the temptation is for Jesus to use his authority as the Son of God to meet his personal needs and desires. While this was no doubt a temptation for Jesus throughout his ministry, Jesus' ministry is always focused on others, never on himself. As we

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=508](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=508)

consider what goes in our bags this Lent – maybe we can ask – what meets only my personal desires, and keeps me from fulfilling my call as a child of God?

The second test relates to power, as Jesus is shown a vision of the world which he can control. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:13: "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" – to counter the test. This was a temptation to embrace what many would have expected of him as the Messiah: political and military might and rule. That Jesus rejects this is a clear sign that his messiahship, his kingdom, is of a different nature than the common expectations<sup>4</sup>.

The desire and temptation of power continues to be one of the greatest challenges which faces most individuals and groups in our world – including ourselves. We all have power, and need it to survive and in many ways prosper in the world. The challenge is of course how we use this power. Jesus does not give up his power in this test – rather he shows that God expects us to use power in a different way – one that is not about power-over, or control of others – but rather is about power-with and shared expectations and justice. It remains the greatest challenge of our world today and is at the heart of all peace talks and stories of forgiveness.

Maybe the Lenten question for our bags then is – what power do we need to put away – let go of – that would allow us to be transformed. It may be power over others, but it may also be a situation or a feeling we allow to have power over us. It may be anger at a person or a situation that has power and control over us. How might we begin the process of giving that way and allowing our lives to be transformed?

The third test is much more difficult to define – for many in the ancient world this would have been interpreted as a magician's trick – throw yourself from the temple and let God save you! Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16: "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" – the same words Moses reminded those wandering in the desert. This is a hard test to interpret – but seems again to be about power, and also about creating spectacle – the 'look at me'. Jesus already knows that people will see him lifted high about Jerusalem – not in a trick – but on a cross. People will come to know the power of God, not through magic, but through love and transformation.

As we consider our journey then, maybe the test we are asked to consider is what things we hold onto that distract us from the real purpose – the quick fixes we are holding onto, rather than putting in the work! This is a test about the work that is required – the action – rather than an instant outcome.

Both Moses and Luke remind us today that in Lent we are called to give thanks and to reflect on our words and actions. Maybe the 40 bag challenge can help us to do that – or maybe other things will engage us. However we pass these days of Lent,

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1574](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1574)

*Lent 1 – 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019*  
*Deuteronomy 26:1-11 ; Romans 10:8b -13 and Luke 4: 1-13.*

may they, as we heard in the invitation – help us *grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord*<sup>5</sup>. Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Ash Wednesday Liturgy – Presidents Introduction to Lent – Common Worship 2011 - <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/41155/tslent.pdf>