

Last week we focussed on the theme of the glory of God and, in particular, the concreteness of this for Paul, first in the person of Jesus as the image of God, but also more generally as a possibility for all human beings through Jesus, by God's grace. Our gospel reading today is one we heard almost in its entirety about 7 weeks ago, where it occurred as it does each year – marking the baptism of Jesus. There we considered something surprisingly similar to last week's reflection, despite the texts apparently being about quite different things: the baptism of Jesus as a symbolic re-creation of humanity in him as the *new* human being over whom the Spirit of creation moves.

But it also needs to be said that to be truly human is not necessarily to look like a "winner". Perhaps this is the point of the very next event recounted after the baptism: the same creator Spirit of Jesus' baptism now *drives* Jesus into the wilderness.

If not necessarily a Godless place, the desert here stands for

a place of god-options. Most Christians are quite familiar with the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert – especially as told in much more detail by Luke and Matthew – but it will help for a moment to set aside the extra detail we know from the other two gospels and to consider simply why the temptation story is even told. Mark's account of the temptations is, in fact, extraordinarily brief. We hear of the 40 days, of Jesus' being with the wild animals, of the ordeal itself and of the angels finally coming to wait upon him. Yet, despite this very compressed account, Mark clearly felt that it was something worth noting, and noting in that part of the gospel where he is setting up the identity of Jesus and the nature of his ministry. In fact, it serves as a thematic summary of the ministry of Jesus – the content of the church's belief in the incarnation. What takes place in the desert – an archetypal conflict of Jesus and Satan – reveals the character what happens throughout the rest of the gospel.

The ministry of Jesus is constantly, if to varying degrees, one of challenge and testing. "Temptation" is a word which has lost most of its punch for us today. These days it's something of a joke, being more likely to feature as the name of a new ice cream or chocolate bar than at the heart of a discussion of the human condition. Even when we try to use it more seriously, it will usually be in moralistic terms: being tempted to do this or that thing we think, perhaps, if we were honest with ourselves, we shouldn't do.

Perhaps our modern translation of the Lord's prayer helps us just a little with its changing of the older "temptation" to "the time of trial". For temptation is a trying, or a testing time; and what is being tested is the clarity of our vision. The reported time with Satan in the desert – whatever form that took or however it might have looked like to an observer – this was nothing other than an experience in miniature of what Jesus is to undergo in his ministry in the months (and years?) to come. His conflicts with the Pharisees and the scribes and the priests, with the disciples themselves and finally with the Romans, are all moments of decision. And they are *decisive* in a literal sense – a cutting away of

ungodly options for the one which reflects the call of God on Jesus' faithfulness.

When Jesus' public ministry begins it is with the proclamation of just one option: turning or "repenting", believing, and embracing the imminent kingdom of the God of Israel. Our life as disciples, which is one of the focal themes of the season of Lent, is a life of just such a turning, and re-turning as is necessary. Ours is to be a life of following in the footsteps of Jesus – a cross-bearing life, whatever form that might take for us.

But, in our attention to our own testings and temptations, to our own choices and decisions, we are to keep also in focus Jesus on his way to the cross, for it is in him that we see both the true nature of our struggles, and the freedom which is required to find a way through them.

This freedom is not natural to us, not least because we don't really imagine ourselves to be particularly bound. But we are subject to principalities and powers, we are tempted to imagine that what is apparently obvious to us is clearly the way of God, and that other ways are distractions or misdirections.

Discipleship is a matter of learning discernment, and making choices and commitments, and learning to discern is a matter of watching Jesus.

The time is growing short and the kingdom of God is drawing near. Let us, then, watch this Jesus as he makes his way through the desert of our lives, that we might learn from him and take his yoke upon us, for the burden he would place upon us is light – the gift of our very selves.

By the grace of God, amen.