

Living every moment for God

The word of faith is near you, on your lips and in your heart. Let us pray. Lord take my words about your word today and through them may your Spirit reveal your word to each one of us in our hearts and what we can share with others on our lips.

We are in the season of Lent now – that is the period of preparation for our celebration of the core of the good news - of Jesus death and resurrection at Easter. And so we began on Ash Wednesday by remembering in action that we are God's creatures, made of the dust of the earth and that our present bodies shall return to that dust all too soon. During this time we focus on the basics of our faith, on who we are and who God is, and what we are about.

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Roman church is sometimes taken, together with the verse – no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1Cor12:3) – to imply that if you can speak out this basic creed and have the basic belief that Jesus rose from the dead then you are saved, full stop. I want to begin by looking at what this passage really says and then go on to look at the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

This bit from Paul is rather poetic – with lots of repetition of words – lips or mouth, heart, believe, call upon, saved – all words that are repeated to draw our attention to their importance and how they are related.

We are the people who have heard the word of faith - that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead. This passage is about what we do with what we have heard.

- Our heart is the core of our physical, spiritual and mental life – our whole integrated self – what we are inside, as a person.
- Believe is a verb not a noun, an action not a statement of intellectual assent, of saying yes/tick/correct to something. Believing is what we do with our hearts. We could replace the word believe with trust in this passage to get a better idea of what Paul is meaning here – trust in your heart that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. This gets across that we trust that God has that sort of power and that affects our whole being!
- Our mouth/lips are the means by which we communicate – we express outwardly what we have in our hearts.
- And the word translated confess here – homologeo in greek – is to say something that is the same as another, that is to agree or assent or declare, to acknowledge publically. So we are to declare out loud, declare in our public life, that Jesus is Lord – that is, that he is in charge, has ultimate authority, over our lives and the world.

So Paul is saying that as you entrust your whole being to Jesus as Lord and our powerful God and express this in your life out there you are saved. And it is all in the present continuous tense – as you keep on acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus and the power of God and trusting him you are working out your salvation. This word of faith is near you – in your everyday life. We are to live every moment for God. We are to live this out in every aspect of our being, from our heart. And this lived out and spoken out trust, this faith, this calling on the name of the Lord Jesus, will lead to any person being saved and not put to shame or condemned.

This is who we are and what we are about as Christians – those who have faith in Jesus. As we keep on trusting in God with the whole of our being and express this in the whole of life, everyday, we are rescued/saved from all that the world may bring to us.

The temptation of Jesus, his testing in the wilderness gives us some insight into this that I'd like to look at next.

The temptations occurs immediately after Jesus is baptized and before he declares what his mission is when he reads Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. At his Baptism God speaks out that Jesus is his beloved son and the devil twice begins 'if you are the son of God. These temptations are about what sort of son Jesus is. To begin with Jesus is not superman – not just seeming like an ordinary human being but really a completely different being under disguise. Jesus is tempted just like us – he shares our flesh and blood – he begins by getting hungry after not eating anything just like we do.

However Jesus has to face not just what Adam faced but all the powers that have been unleashed through human rebellion and sin since the first temptation – the powers of the world, the flesh and the devil. There is not some sort of physical devil there. Rather these temptations are presented as a series of natural ideas in his head – they are plausible, attractive – they make a lot of sense. After all God can't want his beloved son to be famished with hunger, can he? It is like the serpent in the garden of Eden whispering to Adam and Eve plausible lies about God, his purposes and commands. It is also like Israel in the wilderness, grumbling for bread, trying out idolatry, putting God to the test. For Jesus to be the true son of God, the true human being, how can he deliver Israel and the world from the grip of the enemy?

He must begin by defeating him at the most personal and intimate level. Christians today sometimes make the mistake of thinking that as long as they are doing the right thing in public what they do in private doesn't matter so much. We've seen that in some very sad examples of Christian leaders around the world. That is a typical lie whispered by the same voice that Jesus heard in the desert. If God is working by the Spirit through a person, that person's own life will be increasingly formed by that Spirit through testing at every level. If Jesus could not win the victory there, there was little point in carrying on.

The devil presents a story of self-indulgence, and of getting status and power for his own benefit. Jesus presents a different story not by arguing. Arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist. Rather Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy (the time of Israel in the wilderness) that God is the true source of life and identity, that he must rely on God in true worship and service and that God's character is not to be tested. Jesus is dependent on God rather than himself for his life, status and identity. Jesus and the devil both use scripture but only Jesus speaks with the integrity that connects his lips and his heart. We too must read the Bible focused on God and his nature rather than being focused on ourselves and our own benefit.

We are now in our 40 days of testing – Lent – looking at the basics of who we are and what are we about – just as Jesus was tested in who he was and what he was about. Our Romans passage focused us on how we are to live every moment with faith, trusting in our powerful God and expressing the Lordship of Jesus. So what can we learn from how Jesus responded to these tests of identity and calling.

Jesus was filled with the Spirit and driven by the Spirit into the wilderness and this time of testing. The New Testament illustrates how, repeatedly, as Christians are filled with the Spirit they too are led into trials and testing times. This applies to us too.

Testing is perhaps a better word than temptation, though our understanding of temptation is part of this testing. When we think of temptation we usually mean being tempted to giving in to our appetites and desires for things that bring us pleasure. This testing is not actually about denying ourselves pleasure as God gives much of what is pleasurable in our life. However the first test Jesus faces is related to the pleasure of satisfying one's personal appetite. Jesus reply is that human beings are not solely responsible for their own wellbeing and pleasure. We do not live by bread, the produce of our own hands, alone. When we lack what we desire we see God's provision of so much more. Our focus is to be on God and obeying/serving him, not satisfying ourselves. Then we will discover the fullness of life only God can give.

The next test is about status, authority, fame, power, control. Don't we like to be in control? Jesus identity and mission is not about worldly power but about serving others in obedience to the Father. And the final test is about getting God to provide a powerful spectacle. But Jesus power is used instead for restoring others to life and strength, not saving his own life. His status as God's son commits him to the strange path of humility, service and finally death.

The enemy will return to test his resolve again. But for the moment an initial victory is won. Jesus begins his public career by proclaiming from Isaiah how the role of power used for service will play out – having worked out his identity and purpose, who he is and what he is about, in the face of the devil's testing.

As our faith, our identity and purpose, are tested during these 40 days, we will be tempted to self-fulfilment, power and status, rather than serving, humility and dying to self. We learn to recognize the voices that whisper attractive lies, to distinguish them from the voice of God, and to use the simple but direct weapons provided in scripture to counter the lies with truth.

The Christian discipline of fighting temptation is not about self-hatred, or rejecting parts of our God-given humanity. It is about celebrating God's gift of full humanity, being the best person God made us to be. At the heart of our resistance to temptation is love and loyalty to the God who has already called us his beloved children in Christ. As we keep on trusting in God with the heart of our being and express the Lordship of Christ in our everyday life, he holds out before us the calling to follow him in the path which leads to the true glory. In that glory lies the true happiness, the true fulfilment, which neither world, nor flesh, nor devil can begin to imitate.

As we proceed through these 40 days I hope we will all also take the time to being intentional about who we are and what we are here for as a church. Our Lenten conversations that begin this Wednesday will look at this on both a personal and church level. Lets all commit to join together for this if you can.

Let us pray.

We begin our songs of worship and praise with an affirmation of that word of faith that we have responded to – what we believe with our hearts we express out loud in our lives and our song!

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I believe in Jesus.