

# **Sermon online on Sunday 6 March 2022 by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader**

*Readings: Psalm 91: 1- 11 and Luke 4. 1-13*

## **The Puzzle of Power**



Our news this week is seeing a struggle for power play out across Ukraine, across the whole of Europe and the Western World. There has been much said and written about the psychology and rationale of Mr Putin, but essentially it is all about the need to control people and direct history with little or no reference to the needs of others and to do this, it is necessary to discount the role of God and to set goals that serve only the aggressor.

Of course, Lent is not about pointing the finger, naming and shaming others. The Church invites us in this season, to reflect upon ourselves and it can be uncomfortable to look at the war in Ukraine and, after reacting to a power grab

that results in so much death and suffering, reflect upon the nature of power closer to home. We note that our own country has not always been honourable in its dealings with other peoples and countries, and we are called to contemplate our own use of power.

The temptation of Jesus is all about a choice between taking one of two roads; the road that is God-centred or the one that centres on the self - some of us might use the words evil, the Devil, Lucifer or Satan that are to be found in the various translations of the text. For now, let's not discuss whether the devil is a person of substance but note that evil has been defined as the absence of God and the temptations are all about not taking any account of God.

The first temptation is about misusing power: 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Prove to me who you are by performing a miracle on my command. Note not on God's command, not because of need or out of compassion - but show you can and will do it because you care what I think more than what God thinks.

The second temptation is to bow down and worship a power other than God. If you do this then you can have all the world to do with as you wish and, as Son of God, not be beholden to the will of God the father in heaven. In other words, forget your ministry on earth - let's take a short cut to another kind of Glory - world domination.

The focus for the third temptation is the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem - the seat of Jewish religious and political power: 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here'... for scripture says God's angels will bear you up. The words of Psalm 91 are taken and twisted to serve evil. If you are the Son of God, test God and you will see that you can use God for whatever you like.

For Luke, the writer of the Gospel, Jesus is the Son of God whose identity has already been confirmed by Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, John the Baptist, and the genealogy in Luke 3. He doesn't need to prove it to any one and it is because he is the Son of God that his will, will be one and the same with God the Father. His choice will always be to be spirit led. It is the spirit that leads him into the Wilderness, and it is God's word that provides the answers in his time of temptation.

These temptations of Jesus are all to do with his identity as the Son of God, but take away that framework and we are left with the same temptations faced by every human being. Asking God for what we want, embracing the ideas of forgiveness and life everlasting but putting aside the daily walk with God, utilising faith as serving our lives rather than giving back to God and serving others - working to his praise and glory.

For us all, there is a daily choice (perhaps sub-divided into hours, minutes and moments), when we must choose which way to travel - to be dependent upon God or depend on the

self, for our identity and glory. And... because we are human we are going to sometimes fall for those temptations. That doesn't mean a person is not a Christian. Rather it means that being a Christian is all about recognising weakness and turning back to God; in doing so we turn away from the self and free ourselves to serve others in his name.

There are times in the Gospels when Jesus does take a stand for what is right yet, when he calls a spade a spade, yet most of his time seems to be spent explaining rather than dictating; a great deal of time he is healing rather than confronting. Jesus speaks for the vulnerable and marginalised, shares our human vulnerability and ultimate fragility in dying on the cross. In the end his Glory is dependent on forsaking the use of earthly power.

The curious thing about earthly power is that very nearly everyone can exercise it over someone else and yet we can all be crushed by the power of someone else or even by the power of our own self-seeking. We all need to recognise whatever power we have, whether it be over situations or relationships, whether it be financial or emotional, stems from shared or primary responsibility. The biblical texts remind us that power is always to be exercised within the understanding that we are all under God's dominion.

The Wilderness is not only a place of the temptations of our own desire and power. We see in Jesus that it is a time of calling out to God, turning to his Word and seeking spiritual

strength. Times of wilderness challenge us, too. Right now, the people of many countries feel as if they are either in the Wilderness or the Wilderness is returning; above all we need to armour ourselves with prayer as this new political scene unfolds.