

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	22 February 2026
Service:	Eucharist, First Sunday of Lent
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.'

'Then' refers to what had occurred just before: his baptism in the Jordan, which we celebrated a few weeks ago. 'Up' reminds us of where he was baptised, because the Jordan valley is one of the lowest places on earth. To reach the desert, Jesus had to ascend. But we are also told that he didn't just choose to go up; rather, he was *led up by the Holy Spirit* into the wilderness, the forum where he would face temptation.

His baptism had been a life-changing event. He had seen the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and heard himself addressed as God's beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. Powerful words and signs, testifying that he was the chosen one, the Lord's anointed. At the Jordan, Jesus received his vocation to become Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

Little wonder that after such a staggering experience he needed to go apart, reflect, and pray about what had happened. Jesus must have known that acting out those claims would lead to deadly conflict with the leaders of his people and the occupying Roman forces. Therefore, he went away to be alone, to commune with God, and consider his call.

The temptations are particularly striking. At the most basic level the devil attacked him where it hurt the most: his empty stomach. Jesus had been fasting and was very hungry, so the first thing the devil exploited was his desperate need for food. The sneering tone in Satan's voice is evident: if you are the Son of God then make these stones turn into loaves. After all, what kind of divine Son are you, if you can't produce a bit of bread to ease your hunger pangs! But instead, Jesus rebutted the devil's attack with a word of Scripture: one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

The devil therefore raised the stakes. He carried him up to the highest place in the Holy City, the pinnacle of the temple, and told him to cast himself down. Again, we hear the mocking tone: 'If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down.' Satan had been doing his Bible study: after all it had been promised in the psalms that angels would bear him up. But once again Jesus rebutted him with an appropriate scriptural text.

In the third temptation the devil took him higher still, to one of the lofty mountains near Jerusalem. He encouraged him to look down on everyone and everything from a great height. And even more wickedly, he tempted Jesus to commit the worst sin possible for a Jew: idolatry, adoring one who is not God, a sin committed by his ancestors in the desert. But as the truest of Israelites, Jesus reaffirmed his Jewish faith, reminding Satan that God - and only God - is to be adored.

These are strange and powerful stories of conflict between God and evil. But I do not think we should take them too literally, as if Jesus had been somehow flown up to the top of the temple, then flown across to the mountain top. I find it more helpful to think that these things occurred in the place where temptation always happens, deep within the self. It is in the heart, that mysterious place within us that John Henry Newman called the spring of thought and emotion, that the devil always attacks. Jesus himself taught that it is from the heart that those things emerge which defile a person.

We cannot psychologise Jesus, but after the momentous events at his baptism, it is surely reasonable to imagine some turmoil in his inner life. A great calling brings great inner disturbance. He had just been told that he was the beloved Son of God and the Lord's Messiah. But what kind of Messiah would he be? Many 1st century Jews thought they knew the answer: a perfect king to oust the occupying Romans or a perfect priest to purify the Temple and oust its corrupt priesthood.

But it is obvious from his ministry that Jesus did not think of himself in those terms. That is probably why he was so guarded later about acknowledging that he was the Messiah - the title carried too much political baggage and was guaranteed to raise false expectations. Jesus envisioned himself as a different kind of Messiah and for many he would prove to be a disappointing one.

He viewed himself not as a conquering king or perfect priest but as the 'suffering servant' foretold by the prophet Isaiah. That was a mysterious figure, of whom it had been prophesied that he would be led like a lamb to the slaughter yet by his sufferings would justify many. Jesus redefined the notion of

the Messiah in that light. He would abandon himself into the hands of his Father, trusting that God alone would bring in his kingdom - not by any earthly strength - but solely by the power of his death and resurrection.

The 'up and down dynamics' of the temptations to which I alluded earlier are important here. We will shortly recite in the Creed, 'He came down from heaven' because on coming into this world at Christmas, Jesus made a descent. St Paul tells us in Chapter 2 of his Letter to the Philippians that though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not grasp at his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the form of a slave.

Everything about Jesus therefore speaks not of self-exaltation but of its opposite – humility and self-emptying. He did not go up from the Jordan valley to the desert through self-will: rather he was led up by the Holy Spirit. And the temptations he underwent aimed to get him to do everything contrary to the entire thrust of his downward-facing mission. He hadn't just looked down at us from on high – he came down to be with us and to save us.

But the devil invited him to do the exact opposite: to exalt himself, use his power arbitrarily and not rely on God – in short to be the kind of 'Superman-Messiah' that everyone was hoping for. That was precisely what he had not come to be.

By defeating Satan therefore Jesus both launched his mission with a triumph and confirmed why he had come. But it was only the beginning, which is why we read it today on the first Sunday of Lent. His real triumph lay ahead, only after the final conflict with Satan and with death itself, the last enemy to be destroyed. Only through his agony in the garden and sacrifice on the cross, would Jesus ultimately triumph – passing through death to new life – for us and for our salvation.

What can we draw from this as we begin our Lenten journey to Easter? The temptations shed light on two things: how we think about God and our Christian calling.

Regarding how we think about God, it encourages us to be confident in approaching him. The Son of God shared not only our suffering and death but even temptation itself, but he did it from a position of strength as our Saviour. While fully human, Jesus is not merely so. He is God-made-flesh, Immanuel, 'God with us.' No matter what difficulties we encounter or temptations we endure, God in Christ knows what we go through. As the Letter to the Hebrews

says, in Jesus we have a great High Priest who is compassionate and merciful because he has been tempted in every way that we are - yet without into sin.

Because of Christ therefore we should have no fear in approaching God - reverence and respect for sure, adoration for sure - but never merely craven fear. God is always there to support us. Holding on to Christ in faith, we learn that there are no temptations or conflicts from which we cannot emerge victorious – including the final conflict, with death itself.

Regarding our Christian calling, the temptations can teach us much. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. As he abandoned himself fully to God, he asks us to abandon our petty egoisms and self-will, our need to be in control, trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead us, though not into a life of comfort or pleasure.

Instead, the Spirit will guide us to something deeper and more enduring than any earthly security can offer: the profound inner peace that comes from being one with God. Along that path of discipleship many temptations and struggles will be endured. But through his self-emptying, his temptations and above all his death and resurrection, Jesus has gone ahead of us and is with us. Victory is assured! Let that note of triumph mark our Lenten observance as we journey together to the joy of Easter Sunday.