

Falling short

So it's the first Sunday of Lent, that season of the Christian year leading up to Easter, when the church focuses on sin, the flesh and the devil. Well, what's different, some sceptics might ask – isn't that what the church is always on about? Well, hopefully not, but this Lent season does give us a chance to ponder what the world often prefers to ignore: the dark side of human nature, what we call our 'fallenness'. And this morning I want to do this by engaging our Gospel reading with our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. In the gospel passage from Matthew 4 Jesus has just been baptised; he has been declared at this baptism to be God's Son, God's beloved, and now he is immediately led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Firstly, after 40 days of fasting, when he is famished, he is tempted to turn stones into bread. And then he is taken to the pinnacle of the temple and tempted to leap off it in a mighty stunt, relying on God's angel's to save him. And then he is taken to a high mountain and offered all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for bowing down to the devil.

Now, we could ponder at length these temptations and what lies behind them, but clearly Jesus is being tempted here to sin - and I wonder how you would define sin. What do you think sin is? Is it breaking God's Law? Is sin primarily disobedience? And here I want to bounce this passage off our Romans reading where Paul, talking about the universality of sin, describes it as 'falling short'. And I want to use that phrase to understand Jesus' temptations. You see, you could argue that in themselves they did not all necessarily involve wrong-doing or disobedience. Turning stones into bread to feed a famished body - what is so wrong with that? And jumping from the pinnacle of the temple: what law was that breaching, apart from health and safety? Even falling down and doing homage to the devil – what matters surely is that the kingdoms of this world would then be in Jesus' grasp, and they would be in the keeping of the one to whom they truly belong. Isn't that what Jesus came to do? The real question however, is what would salvation have looked like if Jesus had adopted these means. What would he have accomplished? The truth is that Jesus would have been a super-politician, fixing the world and putting it to rights – and I'm not sure that the world needs one more super-politician. Jesus the super-politician would have fallen short, fallen far short of Jesus, God's beloved Son. And the world ruled by Jesus the super-politician would have fallen far, far short of the glory of the Kingdom of God. You see, Jesus' sights are on something bigger. His salvation is so much more than what the devil was offering him.

I wonder how you react to sin as falling short. What I think is interesting is that in fact the whole notion of falling short lies at the very heart of our culture today – people are constantly being made to feel they are falling short. If you do not have the perfect body – especially if you are a woman – you are falling short. If you are not having great and very frequent sex, you are falling short. If you are ageing and showing it you are falling short and you must resist it at all costs. And capitalism of course feeds on creating a sense of falling short, creating felt needs that can only be met by buying more, consuming more, possessing more for otherwise you are missing out. And go into a bookshop and there are any number of titles designed to instil in you a sense that you are falling short. Self-improvement is big business and it all rests on the assumption that somehow you are missing out, falling short, your potential is unrealised and that you can do better. And doubtless a bit of self-help might improve some people's lives and who would begrudge that? But recognise that it falls way short! The self-improvement industry is in danger of offering salvation for a secular age, and what it amounts to is more productive lives, more efficient lives, more successful lives – the very things the devil offered Jesus in the desert. The irony, of course, is that our modern world is falling short, but more profoundly. It falls short despite all the hype that comes with our startling technological advances. It falls short in our endless captivity to consumption and to screens, and it falls short in our selling of our souls to bread alone, and it falls short in denying to great swathes of humanity justice and equality. It falls short in true humanness. But the answer lies not in more productivity and more 'successful' living: anything but.

That brings us back to Jesus and back to sin. When I look at Jesus what I do see is a life that did not fall short. Here was a man who loved God and loved people all the way to the edge and beyond. Here was a man who in his ministry revealed the full dimensions of what it means to be human. Here was a man who realised that life bought on the cheap soon wears thin and that eternal life comes with a price-tag.

This season of Lent that we have begun this week is a season of self-examination, an invitation to reflect upon our lives. We have before us the life of Jesus, one that did not fall short. He knew himself to be God's beloved and he lived as God's beloved. You are God's beloved too: could I suggest that you might examine yourselves and ask where you are falling short, where the world is short-changing you, praying for grace to learn from him. Amen.

O gracious and holy God,
 eternal trinity of glory,
 dwelling in love and joy and peace,
 before time and beyond time
 and far above and beyond us;
 in Jesus Christ you have laid aside that glory
 and come amongst us,
 become vulnerable,
 living life in our shoes,
 exposed to hunger and pain and to temptation,
 feeling our joys and sorrows
 and holding fast and faithful to the one who sent you.
 We praise and worship you and rejoice in your
 Solidarity with us.
 For we live in this troubled world,
 where we find it hard to distinguish what we can do
 from what we should do;
 and in seeking life we make foolish choices
 and fall far short of who we truly are.
 So we come seeking forgiveness and grace to
 emend our lives.

Lord Jesus Christ,
 Come to raise us to our true destiny,
 assure us that we are beloved and forgiven
 and give us grace to walk your way,
 for we pray in your name and in your words,
 saying together...