

Order of Service 6th March 2022

Passing Tests

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 6th March 2022. Our service today looks at the theme of Passing Tests on this, the first Sunday in Lent. We come to worship God.

Call to Worship (Deuteronomy 6: 5 - 9)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

We consider, during this time of Lent, the strength and depth and breadth of our commitment to God as we sing, *Father, hear the prayer we offer.*

Hymn (BPW 523) **Father Hear the Prayer We Offer**

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength, that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but by steep and rugged pathways
Would we seek you fearlessly.

Not forever by still waters
would we idly rest and stay;
but would smite the living fountains
from the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.

Prayers

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
so that we may truly love you
and worthily praise your holy name;
through our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Teach us, good Lord,
to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will.
Amen.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Offering

Lord, we thank you for your invitation to share your goodness in gifts to others.
Please take our offerings and use them to bless your world. Amen.

We sing the song, *Men of faith...*

Song (WT 292) **Men of Faith**

Verse 1

Men of faith rise up and sing
Of the great and glorious King.
You are strong when you feel weak,
In your brokenness complete.

Chorus

*Shout to the north and the south,
Sing to the east and the west,
Jesus is Saviour to all,
Lord of heaven and earth.*

Verse 2

Rise up women of the truth,
Stand and sing to broken hearts,
Who can know the healing power
Of our awesome King of love.

Chorus

*Shout to the north and the south,
Sing to the east and the west,
Jesus is Saviour to all,
Lord of heaven and earth.*

We've been through fire,
We've been through rain,
We've been refined
By the power of His name.
We've fallen deeper
In love with You,
You've burned
The truth on our lips.

Chorus

*Shout to the north and the south,
Sing to the east and the west,
Jesus is Saviour to all,
Lord of heaven and earth.*

Verse 3

Rise up church with broken wings
Fill this place with songs again
Of our God who reigns on high;
By His grace again we'll fly.

Chorus x 2

Lord of heaven and earth,
Lord of heaven and earth.

Our prayers of intercession this week are led by Denise Rée.

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, hear our prayers.

As we sit in our homes, with those we love close by, we think of those across the world whose lives are thrust into our homes through our TVs.

It is hard to comprehend the fear they feel in the Ukraine and Russia. Lives torn apart by the invasion; families fleeing; some staying to fight. Be with them, Lord, as their world crumbles around them.

We ask you to guide those who meet to try to come to an agreement for peace. May they find strength and wisdom to decide what is the best way forward.

We pray for the rest of the world as we watch, not knowing how we can or if we should help.

We pray people will act wisely and think of each other's needs, as the wider impact is felt around the world.

Be with us in the UK as we start to resume normal life after the lifting of COVID restrictions. Help us to have the confidence to trust that the right decisions are made.

We pray for the expertise of the doctors in the NHS, and for a speedy recovery to those who have recently had surgery in our Hearsall family.

We bring you these prayers in the knowledge of your infinite wisdom and compassion for us.

And in a moment of reflection, we bring before you anyone known to us in need of prayer today.

Lord, hear our prayers. Amen.

Thanks so much for those prayers, Denise. Now we hear our Bible readings from 1 Peter and from Luke.

Bible Readings

1 Peter 1: 22- 2:10

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For,

‘All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures for ever.’

And this is the word that was preached to you.

2 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The living Stone and a chosen people

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

‘See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.’

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,’

⁸ and,

‘A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.’

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Luke 4: 1 - 13

Jesus is tested in the wilderness

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³ The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.'

⁴ Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone."'

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.'

⁸ Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."'

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

¹² Jesus answered, 'It is said: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

According to Hebrews, Jesus learned obedience through his time on earth, We consider Jesus' challenge on our own lives.

Hymn **Will you come and follow me?** (BPW 363)

Will you come and follow me,
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you
And you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare,
Should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you,
And you in me?

Will you let the blinded see,
If I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
And never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
And do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you,
And you in me?

Will you love the "you" you hide,
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you,
And you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In Your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show,
Thus, I'll move and live and grow in you,
And you in me.

And now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Passing Tests

Did you like taking exams at school, college or university? Not many of us did.

I guess there are a couple of ways of looking at such exams. We could see them as a **threat** - the examiner wants to expose our weakness! We could see them as an **opportunity** - to show our strengths.

One of my sons recently passed his driving test on the second attempt. When he didn't pass the first time, I tried to encourage him by saying it would make him a better driver in the long run. I suppose that kind of remark might be annoying, but he seemed to take it in good part and redoubled his efforts to become a good driver.

It's great that we live in a country where driving tests are required! How much safer our roads must be because testing is done. The same might be said of MOT tests. So, whilst we might want to avoid tests, in the long run, and looking at the bigger picture, we can see how important they might be.

General life throws up tests for us all, and, as creatures looking for security, protection and stability, we naturally feel concern or even distress when a test comes our way. What tests have you met recently?

- Apparently hostile actions from someone you had considered a friend?
- A general indifference towards a project you are working on?
- The challenging behaviour of a family member?
- An illness?
- A financial problem?

Is our church family facing a testing time as we experience different views about room lettings, the future of the buildings and other matters? Can we actually grow stronger through the tests we experience?

During the season of Lent we imaginatively enter into the testing of Jesus, and try to understand his experience. As a result, we hope and pray that our own experiences of testing may be understood more positively.

* * *

The first thing to notice is that Jesus was led **by the Spirit** into the wilderness. His encounter with the devil was no accident. On the contrary, it was God who drew him towards this test, this examination.

Next we notice that, for Jesus, this was a superlative exercise in **self-discipline**. He ate nothing for forty days, and, as he prayed and fasted, his commitment to the nature of the mission God was giving him was tested out.

Who or what was 'the devil' in these scenes? Is this merely a way of talking about Jesus wrestling within himself about his calling? The tests or temptations follow the baptism of Jesus, when he was hailed as God's Son who pleased God. Was this testing in the desert simply a way of clarifying his commitment to his God-given

identity? I am sure that was an aspect of the experience, but make no mistake - the options proposed by the devil represent realistic choices for Jesus.

It's interesting that all the answers to the devil's temptations come from the book of Deuteronomy. Perhaps Jesus had been meditating on this part of his scriptures. Also, I think Luke, who wrote all this up from a now-lost source of stories he shared with Matthew, might want his readers to understand a contrast between Jesus' faithfulness to God in the wilderness and the Children of Israel's grumbling against God in the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt.

That founding national story of liberation was reflected on in the book of Deuteronomy. The children of Israel failed to keep the faith. They longed to return to the 'fleshpots of Egypt' for food. They demanded bread and water, now. Jesus, always quoting from Deuteronomy, chooses the right path.

* * *

The first temptation in Luke matches that in Matthew - the temptation to make bread from a rock. In the Deuteronomy story, God had plans to feed Israel with manna, but they were unwilling to wait, moaning to Moses, longing to return to the captivity of Pharaoh, where at least they'd had regular food.

Jesus knows there is something even more vital than bread in the stomach - and that is a soul open to the Word of God. Luke records Jesus' answer, *Man shall not live on bread alone*. The text from which Jesus quotes adds, *but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*. Jesus puts receptivity towards the Word of God ahead of his own body's need for food.

* * *

In **the second test** - which, confusingly, in Matthew is the third - Jesus is led to a high place and sees all the kingdoms of the earth in an instant. Jesus could assume control of all the kingdoms of humanity right now; he could be instantly 'King of the World'. All he must do is... bow down and worship the devil.

This kingship of the world ultimately belongs to Jesus anyway. So the temptation is to grasp instantly and in a way that did not glorify God, something that God wants to

give him anyway. Presumably this grasping would be by coercion and might be, perhaps, by military power. But God doesn't want to control populations through tanks and guns; he wants to win hearts and minds through love and truth. So Jesus delves a second time into the Exodus experience as it was mediated through Deuteronomy. *Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.* The original in Deuteronomy reads, *Fear the Lord your God, serve him only, and take your oaths in his name.* The subsequent verse in Deuteronomy is instructive: *Do not follow other gods, the gods of the people around you.*

You'll recall that the children of Israel succumbed to the worship of a golden calf, and were swayed by the worshipping practices of the Canaanites around them. In Exodus 32 we read that, after the golden calf was made, they said, *'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'*

By contrast Jesus remains loyal to the one true God. He will worship and serve only the Lord, and will not be tempted by shortcuts to power.

* * *

In **the third test**, Jesus is taken to a place that is a focal point in Luke's gospel - the Temple in Jerusalem. He is told to toss himself from a high point of that building - for surely God would rescue him.

As is often highlighted, this time the devil quotes scripture! Psalm 91 says *he shall command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways... They will lift you up in their hands so they will not strike your foot against a stone.*

Again Jesus rebuts from Deuteronomy: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test...* The original text finishes, *as you did at Massah.* Massah was the place where, according to Exodus 17, the Israelites grumbled against God and Moses because there was no immediate water supply.

Well, we all need water, but this temptation refers to an attitude of rebellion against God: a failure to trust him, and a petulant demand that thirst must be directly satisfied. In that story Moses was told by God to strike the rock with his staff so that water gushed forth.

In Luke, Jesus again refuses to demand an instant miracle for whatever reason - whether to prove himself God's Son by performing a miraculous stunt or, out of plain folly.

Only one verse concludes the story of all three tests: *When the devil had finished tempting him, he left him until an opportune time.* That is, he left him until the time of his passion.

* * *

These individual temptations Jesus faced may represent different tactics for his mission. He could forget the character and holiness of God, and do things another way. He could solve world hunger at a stroke by making a zillion loaves a day. He could become a world ruler, becoming what some - according to John 6 - wanted him to be - a political king, assuming direct control of world affairs. He could fly around the planet like some superman figure, demanding immediate allegiance by showy tactics and spectacular stunts. He could command armies of angels to force people to behave the way God wanted them to behave!

We might say that he did indeed behave in ways that were not completely removed from those proposed by the devil. He fed several thousand people from small picnics more than once. He walked on water.

But these miraculous events were controlled and contained and done for a specific purpose at a specific time. As for the healing miracles, one often gets the sense that Jesus performed them largely out of a private compassion for suffering people and not to build up his own prestige, as he frequently told those healed not to tell anyone about it.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus had been baptised prior to his temptation. At that point, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove, and that same Spirit led him to the place of testing. And he was told he was God's beloved Son; he was one who pleased God.

In these tests we learn that Jesus' own commitment **matches** God's call and declaration. God tells him who he is; Jesus aligns himself with that identity. Jesus

had passed his examination for now, but a tougher test will come in three years' time.

* * *

And so back to us. As we face tests, what can we learn?

The word translated both 'tests' and 'temptations' can have different meanings and emphases. Luke of course wrote in Greek, and he uses the word *peirizein* that can mean:

1. To try, to attempt **generally**
2. To try, to test, **with good intention**
3. To try, to test, **with bad intention.**

The devil may test us with a bad intention.

The Lord always tests us with a good intention.

James 1:13 - 14 says, *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me". For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone... but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed.*

In the Lord's prayer we ask, *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.* The word for temptation is a form of that same word: *peiraznon*.

So, we see two different sorts of testing indicated by the same word. The devil may be tempting us to failure. But if God allows us to be tested, it is so that the preciousness of our faith and the commitment of our heart and our sense of identity, and the quality of our character may be seen.

Peter wrote these words to the suffering church:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all

kinds of trials [tests, temptations]. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Jesus' tests were an opportunity to match his commitment to his identity as God's Son. Peter goes on in the reading we heard to remind his listeners who they were: A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, called to praise him and live in the light of his mercy. And God's Spirit has been poured out on all his people.

Our tests are an invitation to root ourselves in such truths. Our identity in Christ is special - we are beloved, honoured, connecting with God, belonging to God, praising God, filled with God's own Spirit. **This** is who we are.

So, what tests are you meeting right now?

- Are they just **random events** to which you must respond?
- Are they **invitations from the devil** to grasp, control, react, abuse, panic, or in some other way behave apart from the love of God?
- Or are they **invitations from God** to allow your faith to be refined? Are they in fact precious opportunities to make it clear to ourselves, to God and to others that we serve God unreservedly, that we do things God's way, that we always search for peace and truth and justice, and that the love of God will triumph over all?

So what tests are you facing right now? Can you see them in **godly** terms? Has **the Spirit** led you into a place of testing so that your faith may be refined?

The church faces tests - will we do things God's way, or will we simply ape the world?

And the world faces a test as one country invades another. How do we respond? Wringing our hands in impotent despair? Or redoubling our efforts to help the refugee, hold tyrants to account and build a world based on democracy, freedom of faith and shared prosperity?

May we pass the test.

Every test is an opportunity to learn how broad and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, for us, and for all God has made. We sing together, *In Christ there is no east or west.*

Hymn (BPW 482) **In Christ there is no East or West**

In Christ there is no east or west
In Him no south or north,
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

In Him shall true hearts everywhere
Their high communion find:
His service is the golden cord
Close binding all mankind.

Join hands, then, people of the faith,
Whate'er your race may be!
Who serves my Father as His child
Is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both east and west,
In Him meet south and north,
All Christian souls are one in Him,
Throughout the whole wide earth.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you

Wherever he may send you;

May he guide you through the wilderness;

Protect you through the storm;

May he bring you home rejoicing

At the wonders he has shown you;

May he bring you home rejoicing

Once again into our doors.