

St Andrews Church, Cherry Hinton
Lent 3 23 March 2025
Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-9
Luke 13:1-5

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Love and Repentance

Jesus was tempted as we are. In Lent we remember his 40 days in the wilderness, being tempted in ways that went to the heart of his very identity, all that meant most to him, his relationship with his Father and with us, the two great loves of his life.

He had just been baptised by John the Baptist, and had his identity affirmed in the most dramatic way possible. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him and **‘a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’** (Luke 3:22) It is an identity utterly centred on God, on love, and on being loved by God.

That is exactly where his temptations attack him. **‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread...’** **‘If you will worship me’**, says the voice of the devil, you will have power over **‘all the kingdoms of the world’**. **‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here...’**, impress people with a spectacular stunt. (Luke 4:1-13)

How did he respond? Note this well. In each case, he quoted scripture. **‘It is written... It is written... it is written...’** (Luke 4:4, 8, 10; Matthew 4:4, 6, 10) Jesus was steeped in scripture, it was formative for his identity, his self-understanding, the deepest meaning and truth of his life. And he summed it all up in terms of love (quoting scripture): **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”**(Matthew 22:37-40)

(Though note this well too, the devil also quotes scripture - but not about love. The corruption of the best can be the worst)

In response to that first temptation, Jesus says: **‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’** (Matthew 4:4)

Today, on this third Sunday of Lent, what words are we being fed by God in our readings, words we can live by?

First, we have heard words from Isaiah, the book that has been called ‘the fifth Gospel’, and one that Jesus quoted often. In it God cries out to us to come, and receive the best imaginable offer of free drink and a feast of rich food, the food and drink of the message, the word, of God and God’s love. This is what we are to feed on. **‘Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good [listening as eating]... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.’** And what is at the heart of it?—This: an everlasting covenant, commitment to ‘... **my steadfast, sure love**’. This is mind-blowing, far beyond what we can think or imagine: **‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’** (Isaiah 55:2, 3, 8, 9) Those are the thoughts and ways of steadfast, sure, reliable, trustworthy love. And we will never completely fathom that love.

Then we said and listened to Psalm 63, that great song about the satisfaction of our thirst and hunger for God. Again, we are given food for our spirit, our heart, our mind, our soul, our core identity. **‘My soul is satisfied with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night, for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me’** And what is at the heart of it?—This: ‘... **your steadfast love is better than life itself**’

That is my key text this morning. What a motto for Lent! **‘Your steadfast love is better than life itself’**. But what does it mean?

This love is ours whether we live or whether we die. It is ours on both sides of death. So of course it is better than life itself. It is love given by the God who creates life, and has created us to live lives of inspired loving. That is the vocation of each one of us. This love means that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us. The worst thing is not living lives of love, disobeying the greatest and second greatest commandments—just as, for most soldiers in life or death wartime situations, when the future of their country is at stake, the worst thing is not death, but letting down their comrades, their regiment, their country.

‘Your steadfast love is better than life itself’. During Lent, we can listen to Jesus teaching us this. At his Last Supper, as he prepares his disciples for his crucifixion the next day, he commands them—though it is a command that is more like a heart to heart appeal, friend to friend, ‘Please, please, do this!’—**‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you...’** (John 15:12-14)

‘If’! That is what Lent is about. It is about following the one who demonstrated that for him steadfast love, for God and for us, was better than life itself, and urged us, as

his friends, to love as he loved. But in Lent we are also invited to be utterly realistic about that *'if'*. Do we do what Jesus commands? Do we even wholeheartedly desire it? Our hearts and minds, our culture and media, are full of stimuli to put other things first. Is thirsting and hungering for God and his steadfast, sure love, a love that is better than life itself, our top priority, day by day?

The wisdom of Lent says: of course we fall short; of course our desires and our actions fall short. But there is good news, in fact the best news imaginable. *We can develop the habit of repentance.* And, when we honestly face up to the ways we fall short in loving God and loving our neighbours, we have a completely fresh start. And it is possible to grow in love, to mature in love, and for a community like this here in St Andrew's to grow in love, to deepen our friendships, to make sacrifices in loving service. That should be what we hunger and thirst for.

Jesus often used shock tactics to drive home his points. He knew how we can resist even taking God seriously. On repentance, our Gospel reading today is a good example. Pilate, the notoriously brutal Roman governor, in an empire where might was right, had had some observant Galilean Jews executed—he had mingled their blood with their sacrifices. Jesus comments on the news: **'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will *all* perish as they did.'** (Luke 13:2) The point being dramatically driven home is: you **'all'** need to repent. So do we all. And Jesus longs to give us a fresh start every day. That is actually the only reliable way to grow in love: to fail, to be honest about it, and to turn to the God of love, mercy and compassion again and again and again. The basic way Jesus taught us to do this is by praying the prayer he taught us: **'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'** That comes after **'your will be done'**, and at the heart of that will is love. It is wise to pray this at least once a day

Probably the greatest example of a fresh start in loving comes in the last chapter of the Gospel of John (John 21:15-19). Earlier, during the trial of Jesus before that same Pontius Pilate, Peter had denied he even knew Jesus. Now Peter meets the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Jesus, by laying down his life, has just demonstrated his utter love for Peter, and for all of us. The surprise outcome has been Jesus raised from the dead, alive in a new way, and sending his followers to live as he has lived, and love as he has loved. As he breathed the Holy Spirit into them he had given them their vocations (and us our vocations): **'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'** (John 20:21) Now, in a one-to-one conversation, three times he asks Peter, by name—actually going back to his birth name, **'Simon, son of John'**, to the roots of his identity—the crucial question that he asks each of us: **'Do you love me?... Do you love me?... Do you love me?'** And, when Peter says **'Yes... Yes... Yes'**, what does Jesus do? We are back to food. Jesus tells him, **'Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.'**

But that is not all. Jesus adds: **“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. [the Greek word for wished is *thelein*, meaning also ‘to desire’ or ‘to will’, and it runs all through the Gospel of John] But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish [that word again—‘do not desire’] to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God. After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”** Peter is being taught the life-transforming and death-transforming truth: God’s **steadfast love is better than life itself**. And that liberates him from having, when he feared for his life, let Jesus down, and it liberates him to start afresh living a life of love, service and community-building.

We may not be called to glorify God by dying—though you never know, there may well be future martyrs among us here: these are very serious times—but I am sure anyone who loves will have had the experience of having to go to places where you did not wish to go, for the sake of love to go against what you would have preferred. Lent is a good time to practise for that side of loving. As that powerful collect for the first Sunday of Lent says:

*Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin,
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*