

## Lent 2023 Gospel Conversations Session 1

**Opening Worship** using the booklets provided. This means that, although we may be in different groups at different times, we are united by sharing the same worship.

### Matthew 4. 1 – 11 The Temptation of Jesus

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit (tying it in with the preceding baptism) into the wilderness (nearly always a place of struggle) to be tempted by the devil. (Note different interpretations of the devil: here he is personified.) <sup>2</sup> He fasted for forty days and forty nights (compared with Moses in Exod 34.28 who also fasted but was in close contact with God on Mt Horeb; or with Elijah in 1 K 19. 1 – 8, but he was fed miraculously with divine food. Note Mark and Luke only have forty *days*.) and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> (In fact, he would be dead if he really hadn't eaten anything for 40 days and nights. Hunger is the first cause of temptation.) The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' <sup>4</sup> But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (See Deut 8.1 - 3)

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",  
and "On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

(Note references in Matt 26.53f where Jesus does not call angels to help him and in 27.40 where he refuses to follow the scribes who say *If you are the son of God*. This episode points towards the passion and Jesus' obedience then.)

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"'

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain (compare 17.1 where he ascends a high mountain with his disciples, and 28.16 and 18 where he is on a mountain again. Mountains are always significant.) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, 'All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.' <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! (cf Jesus speaking to Peter in 16.23 Get thee behind me . . .) for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## Context

In context: so far, the readers of Matthew's gospel have heard about Jesus' birth, his flight to and from Egypt and his baptism by John. Now he is challenged to follow an easier path, to buy into a worldview which recognises wealth, power and status. In the end, the devil does not have power over Jesus. It is the devil who walks away. The account is important because it demonstrates obedience – one of Matthew's important themes – and the nature of sonship.

Three times Jesus answers with a quote from Deuteronomy. Jesus is neither a magician nor a politician, but the son of God. The three temptations are really one in different forms: you can be God if you follow me and take power to yourself.

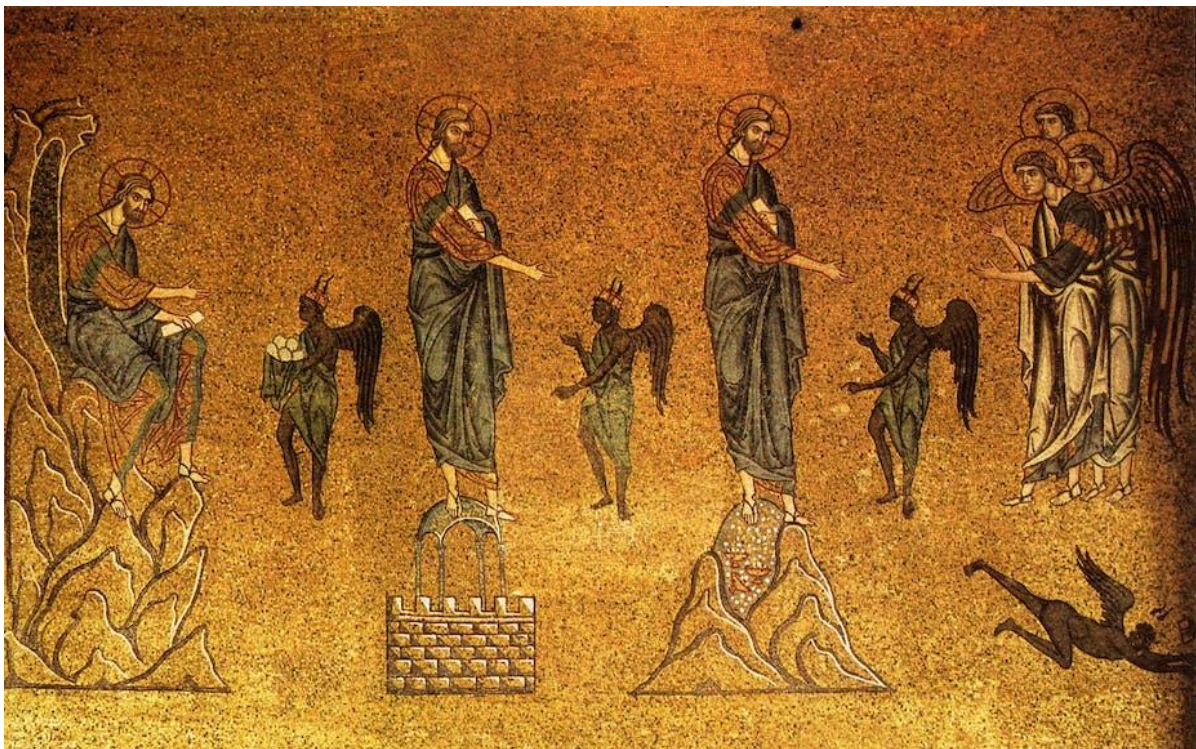
- 1 set aside the laws of nature and rely on yourself/provide your own food
- 2 become a spectacle; throw yourself down and laws of nature will be changed
- 3 be powerful



***Choose some of these questions to discuss***

1. Look up Luke 4. 1 – 13 and Mark 1. 12 – 13. What differences do you notice in the order in Luke (2 and 3)? Why is Mark's account so sparse?
2. What do we learn about the kind of person Jesus is?
3. Which of the three temptations, if any, do you struggle with? Or, more generally, what are the things in our world which test your powers of resistance e.g. achievement, financial status, porn, drugs and alcohol, pride, self-righteousness, laziness, too much food/drink . . . to name but a few.

Looking at the pictures below



*12<sup>th</sup> Century mosaic, St Mark's Basilica, Venice*

4. How does the mosaic alter your perception of the *written* biblical account, if at all?



The Devil carries Jesus to a mountain to tempt him. *Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript library MS 425, fol 48r.*

5. In what way do the two images address the power relationship between Jesus and the devil?
6. To what extent would you agree that, whilst both are dealing with the same event, one resonates with the events of Good Friday, and the other with Easter Sunday?



**Time for reflection**

**Share** one feeling and one thought at the end of the session.

Finish by reading this poem and then saying the Grace together.

## **'On the pinnacle'**

'Temples and spires are good for looking down from;  
You stand above the world on holy heights,  
Here on the pinnacle above the maelstrom,  
Among the few, the true, unearthly lights.  
Here you can breathe the thin air of perfection  
And feel your kinship with the lonely star,  
Above the shadow and the pale reflection,  
Here you can know for certain who you are.  
The world is stalled below, but you could move it  
If they could know you, as you are up here.  
Of course, they'll doubt, but here's your chance to prove it  
Angels will bear you up, so have no fear . . .'

'I was not sent to look down from above,  
It's fear that sets these tests, not love.'

## **Malcolm Guite (Sounding the Seasons)**

**The grace . . .**

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**The excursus provides a few extra notes of interest. They may be useful for private reading outside of the sessions.**

### **Angels in Matthew's gospel**

1. 1.20, 1.24, 2.13, 2.19 The angels guide Mary and Joseph to and from Egypt, providing **protection**.
2. 13.39, 41, 49 The parable of the weeds in the field. The reapers are angels sent by the Son of Man to **get rid of evil**, to separate good from evil, and to throw evil into the furnace.

And similarly, in 16.27, the Son of Man comes with his angels and then 'he will repay everyone for what he has done.' This follows the command to disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him.

3. 24.31 and 36; 25.31 At the end of time, the Son of Man will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will **gather his elect**, though even angels don't know when that will be. Angels will be with him in glory.

4 18.10 Do not despise these little ones for their angels 'continually see the face of my Father in heaven.' Suggests everybody has an angel.

5. 22.30 The story of the seven brothers. In heaven, people don't marry. The wife of the seven brothers is an angel in heaven, and not a wife.

6. 26.53 Jesus says Father would send 12 legions of angels if asked.

7. 28.2 An angel rolls away the stone. Earthquake. Lightning. White as snow. Speaks to Mary.

Angels respond to God's commands, protect, purge, gather, call.

**'The Devil'** elsewhere in Matthew's gospel

Three mentions of demonic influence on individuals 4.24 Jesus cures demoniacs; 9.32 A demoniac who was mute was brought to him; 12.22 demoniac who is blind and mute

Conversation with demons: 8.31 Gadarene swine: the demons begged him – if you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine

11.18 John came neither eating nor drinking and they say he has a demon

16.23 Get thee behind me, Satan!