

# Collect, Readings and Reflection for 22 February 2026, 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

## **Collect** (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Heavenly Father,  
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,  
and grew closer to you in the desert:  
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer  
that we may witness to your saving love  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

## **Readings:** Matthew 4:1–11; Romans 5:12–19

*Today's reflection is by Reader, Cal Bailey.*

## **Jesus' Love & Discipline turns Existence into Life**

Michelle and Barack Obama have succeeded where many have failed. They have a wonderfully loving family, have worked hard and succeeded at two careers. But it wasn't always like that. When they met, Barack Obama was brilliant, but he wasn't self-disciplined. Michelle was. What they've achieved owes a lot to her being the disciplinarian: she insisted on a household with structure — routines for the kids, boundaries around work, and a shared commitment to service.

Our gospel today is about love and discipline turning our *existence* into *deep and lasting Life*. It's about achieving even more than the Obama's have achieved, together, under God. Two weeks ago, we had the story which immediately precedes it: Jesus' baptism, at which God, his father, called him 'Beloved', and the Spirit descended as a dove, demonstrating total support for the third member of the partnership of the Trinity as he embarked on his work on earth. This affirms Jesus' identity and sense of security. We all need to know we are deeply loved and accepted. But the next step is surprising. Immediately, the Spirit, sends Jesus into the wilderness on a 40 day fast to be tempted by Satan. Doesn't sound so loving, does it? Let's try to understand what's going on. Jesus' mission is to bring the whole of creation, including us, back to deep life in God. The question he needed to resolve wasn't the objective but the method: *how* would he do it. And these 40 days helped him decide on the *how*, and prepared him for the huge challenges the mission would bring.

And what we need to see is that the temptations were to do things that in themselves were good but the method, the *how*, meant they weren't. For example, eating: we need to eat when we're hungry – that's how we're made. So what is it about making bread that wasn't good here? Or gaining followers by spectacular signs: Jesus knew he needed followers, and later he did many spectacular signs. So what is it about this sign that isn't good? Or controlling the kingdoms of the world: Jesus' goal was to inaugurate the kingdom of God. So what is it about gaining power that isn't right?

Let's take each temptation in turn. Firstly, the temptation for a very hungry Son of God to use his power to turn desert stones into bread. The lesson here is about the purpose of power. It's not been given to him to serve himself, but others. Instead, he needs to learn to trust God for his own needs. To wait. Not to push. Right after these temptations, you'll have noticed that God's servants, the angels, came and looked after Jesus – at the *Father's* instruction, not Jesus'.

We too need to learn how to use our power correctly. If you have a lot of power, it's very easy to abuse it selfishly – as we know only too well from our media. But anyone who can claim expenses at work will know the same temptation. We all have to learn not to be entitled, and Christians cannot follow Jesus unless they learn, like he learned, to depend on God. And how will we learn that? It begins by developing our habits of self denial. A hungry person doesn't need food every time we pass the fridge.

Think forward to later in Jesus' ministry: in John chapter 4 we see Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman, and his disciples come back from their shopping trip with food for Jesus and are surprised to find him talking to a woman – that was highly suggestive in Jewish society. They urge him to eat and he says: "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." The disciples wonder if someone has brought him food.

But Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." The woman becomes a follower of Jesus, and brings many of her friends to listen to Jesus - for two days! Going without food to do God's work is the discipline, the focus, the determination that Jesus needs. It involves being willing to go without. The story is here because his followers, if they are to do God's work, need to do the same.

There is another story in John 6 where Jesus feeds 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Afterwards, he talks about the saying from the book of Deuteronomy that 'Man does not *live* by bread alone'. We can *exist* on bread. But to *live* we need to listen to God. He says to his followers: "Do not work for the food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." That's a challenge to us. Do we listen to God? Which type of bread do we focus most on? Jesus says: "I am the bread of life". Bread can't be bad, then – but there is good and there is better – and Jesus is wanting us to go for the better, and discover that we are given the good by God on top. In *God's* timing. As a gift.

The second temptation invites Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple. This, the devil cleverly thinks, is just what Jesus wants, because he can demonstrate his trust in God, whose word promises not to let him be injured! And clever tricks will win followers. Win-win! I find this temptation harder to understand. I think we all get the point about tricks that seem to have no purpose beyond gaining attention. But it helps to see when Jesus rejects this same temptation later, when he's under even greater pressure in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prays and is then arrested and one of the disciples draws a sword and cuts off someone's ear. Do you remember what Jesus says? "Put your sword back in its place...Do you not think that I cannot call on my Father and he will send twelve legions of angels?" Jesus has power that he doesn't use.

The point is that Jesus decided what was the right way of restoring earth to heaven in the wilderness: it's not the way of power and spectacle but the way of humility and sacrifice. This is the *how*. It's the way of the cross that we follow; we don't fight power with power but with suffering. If Jesus did it, so will we. It's God's way to deep life. We see the same thing on the cross. Jesus is mocked by the chief priests, by the teachers of the law – "He saved others, but he can't save himself!" Of course he *can* save himself. But he doesn't. Jesus doesn't even reply. Aggressors have their day. But resurrection comes, *when the Father chooses*. God will give growth. It's not for us to fight for it.

The last temptation offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He came to build God's kingdom! But not that way; not by worshipping anyone but God. Some good-looking offers are best declined.

Many of us love power, and I've heard many Christians congratulate someone who wins a big promotion at work; or is victorious at an election to become a Councillor or an MP: "you'll have such influence". This temptation teaches us that such offers aren't always good. The Chief Executive's job isn't to be envied. It can require enormous compromise, which amounts to worshipping the devil. Jesus didn't choose the route of being Prime Minister to build his kingdom, but of being the *outsider*. If we follow Jesus, more of us are likely to be outsider than insiders.

The point about these temptations of Jesus' is that they apply to us too.

We too are beloved by God. That was Jesus' main message. Even the prodigal son, who had rejected his father, could be forgiven and restored. But Jesus invites us to more than restoration. He invites us to join his project of building God's kingdom with him, in God's way, by following him. And, like Jesus, if we chose to follow God, then we too will face great temptations.

So I want to ask you today, this first Sunday of Lent: which path do you chose? There is the wide road and the narrow road. Which do you choose?

Here at St James, we have often spoken of the love of God; and less often of the hard choice we must make if we chose to follow God. Towards the end of Lent is Good Friday when Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. Will you follow Jesus down that road? Then on Sunday, in *God's* timing, life returns. The deep life. This isn't existence, it's richer, deeper, harder. The disciples couldn't follow Jesus on Good Friday: they fled. But they learned to later.

I wonder if there are some here who have heard of God's love, but haven't yet chosen whether to follow? I wonder if there are some who long to go beyond the bread of existence and find the Bread of Life? Will you follow Jesus, despite the choice being so tough? Because love and discipline together are the only foundation for God's kingdom, and for its workers – as Michelle Obama has found. And as she persuaded Barack to follow, so I want to persuade you to follow.

Will you follow this Jesus, the one who rejected the easy, wide, paths and was determined to do it right for his Father in heaven? If you want to seriously consider it, then I want to invite you to join our Start course soon which will help you on the road. And I want to ask you to have the courage to tell one of the leaders here, today, on your way out. It may be a narrow, difficult road, but it's a mighty good one. Have the courage to start!

Amen

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