



The Church of England  
in Essex and East London  

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Diocese of Chelmsford

## **The first Sunday of Lent**

*Jesus in the wilderness*

Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2026

Readings: Matthew: 4.1-11

The Rt Revd Lynne Cullens

The Bishop of Barking

When I was a teenager, my friends and I used to give up something for Lent each year, and each year it was a variation on the theme of some form of sugary treat...so cakes or chocolate or biscuits or sweets. Now when I say we gave them up, I should add that we gave up eating them during Lent but we carried on buying them, so when Easter came around we had a whole six weeks' worth of previously forbidden delicacies to consume.

I'm fairly sure we knew at the time that we were gaming the system and that this was no true form of fast, but I do find myself looking back and reflecting on that memory of very fallible human fasting year by year as we reach these weeks leading up to Easter.

True religious fasting – abstinence from food, drink or specific activities – forms part of the annual cycle of seasonality in several major faiths, in Lent for we Christians, during Ramadan for those of Muslim faith, during Yom Kippur in Judaism and so on.

Such fasting undertaken with serious commitment is felt to foster spiritual growth, repentance and a closer connection with the divine.

And for we Christians, the foundational period of fasting in the Gospels is to be found in our reading for today from Matthew where we see Jesus in the wilderness. This passage sits between the account of Jesus' baptism and the description of his ministry beginning in Galilee. This was a period of being made ready, of preparation for the ministry to come as Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And we hear how Satan uses that opportunity to suggest to him some very worldly temptations....forty days and nights without food? why be hungry, eat says Satan...why play it safe, you'll be fine, says Satan...look at the rewards I can give you, why not follow me instead, says Satan.

The lure of the world and its many temptations to deviate from the calling, will and purposes of God are strong. And the devil whispers to us at our weakest times. But whereas we might stumble and fail, fall victim to those temptations – as I did in my teenage years and still do now – Jesus's fast was perfect. In Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15, it is written 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin'

At each turn when the tempter sought to exploit Jesus' weakness, he responds not in his own strength but by resting on the word of God in scripture.

In doing so, not only is he - at the very peak of his human weakness and frailty – turning Satan back to God's word, he is also affirming it to himself for his own comfort and fortification.

Theologian Tom Wright, in his Lent study entitled *From Wilderness to Glory*, captures this as follows

'The temptations we all face, day by day and at critical moments of decision and vocation in our lives, may be very different from those of Jesus but they have exactly the same point.

They are not simply to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside, from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us'.

Lent is the season to consider how the demands and temptations of the world might be undermining our calling to follow and to serve God. To consider the degree to which our lives are built on and fortified by his word, to repent of the ways we have all strayed and to commit ourselves to a closer walk with him into the future.

When Jesus rebuffed Satan's final temptation God sent angels to attend him. In a similar way, God is present with us; he knows our needs, desires and vulnerabilities, he knows the times when the tempter may strike and he walks with us through those.

This Lent may you know the presence, blessings and forgiveness of God, the hope of eternal life through his son and the leading of his holy Spirit. Amen.