

Sermon  
Invocavit 6 March 2022  
Parish Eucharist Isle of Dogs  
Luke 4:1-13  
Bishop Dr Christian Staeblein

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, stop!

The first Sunday of Lent - Invocavit, translated: he calls me - and also the story of Jesus's encounter with the Tempter in the desert can be condensed into this word. Stop - and this in the twofold meaning: "Stop listening to the false, flattering, seducing, insinuating words of the Confounder, stop it Satan, just stop it." And secondly, "Listen to God's word, he's calling you. Listen to God's word."

We are at a turning point in Europe these days. So let us repeat the twofold meaning of: "Stop!" with due emphasis! For one thing: Stop the war in Ukraine! Putin, stop it! We want to shout it again and again, on behalf of all Europe, on behalf of the maltreated Ukrainian people, on behalf of the innocent children, on behalf of those who often oppose the rolling tanks and attacks with their bodies, their humanity. Stop it, you Russian rulers, stop it, Mr Russian President. We shout this, we shout it with hundreds of millions of Europeans, we also shout this in the name of God who wants peace, who is indeed a God of peace. In His/Her name we also shout "Listen" in this other meaning with due emphasis: "Listen to God, listen to His/Her words of peace, words of outstretched hands, words of steps towards each other." So, "Stop!" and, "Listen to God!"

Dear sisters and brothers, it seems to me this is the first thing we need to say today. After 10 days of war, we are united in this plea. We must not let up sending out this call. And we must not let up turning this call into action. Help for the people in Ukraine, help for those on the run. And prayers. It is from them that the strength grows to endure powerlessness and to let it be transformed. Into the power of hope. In the end, peace and humanity will be stronger.

Thank you, dear Bishop Sarah, dear sisters and brothers, dear friends, for allowing me to preach here today. This is a great honour for me which I can hardly put into words. Moreover, I take it as a great sign that I am allowed to preach here today. As a German, I participate in the responsibility of a people that brought the most terrible, cruel, inhuman and godless war upon Europe. I am deeply grateful for the fact that we met each other as peoples with the peace and liberation of 1945, that a deep friendship unites us today, that this friendship has long since consisted in our standing together on all important issues, that even the Brexit cannot change this friendship at all and only regards this friendship marginally. We learnt it the hardest way what war is, we stand together in the community of the Cross of Nails founded by Coventry in the deep longing for peace. We are particularly committed to this tradition these days.

The story of Jesus's encounter with the Tempter in the desert leads us in a highly topical way to the questions of our own capacity for being tempted. It does so in a way that is as touching as it is depressing, because the Tempter encountered here is anything but stupid. On the contrary, Satan - who in biblical and ancient terms is not a mythical beast with a limp and a smell of sulphur, but the Accuser in the enemy's cause in court, this Satan proves to be Bible-savvy and hermeneutically trained. His news of turning stones to bread and about the kingdoms of this world are not completely made up off the cuff. It is only the provocation of challenging God with them that makes them Fake News. One almost has to say: Satan is a good Propaganda Secretary, so good that every one of his suggestions becomes a temptation again at all times. And this is how I understand the

sermon today: it is meant to strengthen, as best it can, to renew the "stop it" towards this adversary who so easily pretends that he is actually running our cause.

I want to address the three temptations in all due brevity. They are all incredibly topical.

The first: Satan offers Jesus to turn bread into stones in a pact with him. Against hunger. Against his own hunger, but, we can easily continue: against hunger in the world, against hunger in crisis and war zones, against possible hunger in Kiev and Charkiw, in Odessa and Cherson. Let's think about that for a moment, shan't we? Would it not be the duty of the Son of God, would it not be our duty to accept this offer? How many people could be saved? And wouldn't the Son of God himself have a duty in the desert to keep himself fit and healthy enough, so he can be able to help and support others above all else? So stones into to bread? Any time. But not in a pact with Satan. Presumably the Russian president had assumed after all that we, the Western world, would shy away from all too great sanctions and measures for the sake of our economies and for the sake of whoever is well provided for. No, no pact of this kind with the warmonger, no pact with the one who turns all law and all humanity upside down and over. He is not the devil, of course not. But he does something devilish: he throws all humanity overboard. Turning bread into stones in a pact with Satan, this can be called the oral temptation, the temptation to sell one's soul for the sake of material gain. This remains a temptation even when the material advantage is for the benefit of others. It remains the material temptation par excellence, the temptation of materialism - the good goods instead of the faithful guardians. Jesus's answer: Human beings do not live by bread alone. Even when we ask for daily bread, because human beings cannot live without bread. It is not bread alone, and material temptation reduces human beings to that, and it does so in a vile way when people are in need of help. Jesus sets the Spirit against this. It is in this spirit that people in Ukraine, but also in Russia, take to the streets and put their naked lives in front of tanks and against the howling of war. It is in the spirit of truth that man does not live by bread alone, not even in need. Even when human beings need bread to live and we - let no one misunderstand this - and we need to help with all means and provide the goods of life to others.

The second temptation: It is not unlike the first, but it aims less at possessions than at power. Here too, power just like bread is not evil in itself. Power in itself may only be used for good - for peace, for the community. Power in a pact with Satan cannot do that, because it requires Satan to be worshipped. Power in a pact with God's adversary always means: you can be full, you can have everything, only you have to give up your freedom. Big Brother or Sister is watching you. And Big Brother wants you to keep your eyes on him. Always and over again. On his power, his strength - be it phenomenal weapons or big money or total security or simply accepting his claim to power over everything in your life. You probably don't even need to apply that to today's situation, it's easy to see. And so also Jesus's answer: You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him/Her alone. Total and totalitarian claims to power are always a question of the first commandment. In my youth, the story of Timm Thaler was very popular in Germany. It is the story of the boy Timm who - at the price of having all his wishes granted - sells his laughter to a devilish Lord who has everything but cannot laugh. So Timm Thaler loses his laughter and with it his life, despite all his superiority. In these days, we in Europe must stand up for the people in Ukraine and for people's right not to lose their laughter forever. Laughter is an expression of freedom and of God's power in Creation.

The third temptation: Throw yourself down from the temple wall! If God is close to you, he will save you. As He/She said in the 91st Psalm: *God has commanded his angels to keep you, to carry you on their hands, so that your foot will not strike a stone.* - Dear sisters and brothers, this temptation always hurts me particularly. The words from the 91st Psalm are among my favourite words in the Bible; indeed, my parents gave them to me more than half a century ago as my baptismal verse. And now the devil is cleverly arguing with this verse. If the verse about the angels is true, nothing will happen to you? Temptation as a bet - whoever bets like that has already gambled his life away.

Where life and death are at stake, there is nothing to gamble with. So I am glad about the level-headedness in Europe at the moment, that in all clarity against the actions of the Russian rulers, escalations must not be gambled with. "Nothing will happen" does not apply. One must not gamble with life, especially not with the lives of others. During the pandemic, I met people again and again who said that they did not need measures to contain the virus, that God would protect them. Jesus's answer at this point is simple: You shall not tempt the Lord your God. The third temptation concerns temptation itself. Which is why: Yes, God will protect me, all his angels. The licence to tempt however is devil's play. That applies to everyone at all times.

The three temptations, dear all, are quite exemplary. One must expect to encounter them in life. The Tempter always succeeds in making us believe that he is the actual fulfiller of God's will. And yet all he wants is for us to end up being taken in by that spiral of power, greed and possession from which there is hardly any escape. Which is why many rightly say that we should be glad that the temptations in today's story do not come to us, but specifically to the Son of God. Unlike us, He can resist, thereby hermeneutically outdoing Satan the Exegete once again. I do not believe that this will rid us of temptations, which are never about chocolate, but always about soul, laughter and life. We are not free from the fake news that the devil interprets God's will better than others. We are free, however, from getting drowned in this temptation. Jesus has done that for us. So we do what is ours, faithfully, as Paul Gerhardt wrote: only do faithfully what it is yours to do. Today this means: The loud call of "Stop" to the warmongers with whom there can be no pact. The loud call of "Listen" - and the loud call again and again to us: "Listen to God's word." And it shall happen that Satan will depart, the desert will flourish and peace will come. May God grant that. Amen.