

22 FEB 2026 LENT 1

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Power, Property & Prestige - The three Temptations.

Readings: Genesis 9: 8–17; I Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9–15

F S HS

Our first reading today was the story of the covenant God made with Noah, and all humankind, after the great flood. In the story, the rainbow became a symbol of the covenant – the promise that never again would a deluge destroy the whole Earth.

In the 1960s, the late Dr Billy Graham quoted God’s covenant to Noah, when he was asked if he believed the world was about to come to an end. Graham was commenting in the era of the nuclear arms race when people feared the possibility of global destruction by nuclear war.

For many Christians Graham’s re-assurance, based on the covenant with Noah, was quite comforting, even though Genesis only mentions ‘flood’ and no other disaster. The message was clear: God would keep God’s word. Therefore, we have nothing to fear.

Today we hear from the prophets of climate change, that ‘we’ human beings are quite capable of destroying the Earth without nuclear weapons, if we don’t take proper care of creation. We are already experiencing the melting of the polar ice caps and rising sea levels, but I don’t think anyone seriously fears a global flood in our lifetimes.

I don’t know if anyone today still sees the mythical or spiritual symbolism of the rainbow.

In our second reading, the writer of the First Letter of St Peter refers to the great flood as pre-figuring Christian baptism where water symbolically washes our sins away, preparing us for the heaven that the Risen Christ has already entered.

This morning I’d like us to reflect on the temptations of Jesus and their relevance to us today.

I’d like to begin my placing the story of the temptations in a more modern framework. Beginning with a theory by one of the founders of modern sociology, a German thinker by the name of Max Weber. Born: 21 April 1864, in Erfurt, Prussia (modern-day Germany), Max Weber died: 14 June 1920, in Munich, Germany, at the relatively young age of 56.

When I studied Weber, years ago at Auckland Uni, the first thing that I found interesting about Weber was his unusual personality. I read a snippet from a biography written by his wife Marianne Weber’s in 1926 where she wrote of Weber’s long periods of deep, silent reflection, especially during episodes of depression and exhaustion. Marianne

noted that Weber could sit for hours in a state of intense inward concentration, sometimes staring into space, sometimes pacing, sometimes simply withdrawn. It was good to know something about the man behind the academic persona.

In the 1920s Max Weber wrote a seminal essay called: “Class, Status, Party”.

In that essay Max Weber taught that every society is shaped by the unequal distribution of three scarce social resources: **those three scarce social resources are property, prestige, and power which we’ll call, ‘the three P’s’.**

Because these three resources are limited and unevenly shared, people and groups compete for them, creating the patterns of class, status, and political influence that structure our social life.

Weber, a German, was of course writing primarily about Western societies, but I think his theory can also apply to other societies such as Pacific Island and Māori societies, as I will attempt to explain.

Power, property, prestige. The three scarce resources that we humans compete for.

In all societies one or more of those scarce resources will be more important than others.

For example, I sense that in European societies (and I’m speaking in broad generalities - there are exceptions) property and power may rate a little higher than prestige – unless you are a member of the nobility or you value high society.

In European society – prestige (or mana) is not a primary goal compared to the pursuit of property/money and power, which Weber defined as, ‘the freedom /ability to live as you wish, despite opposition’.

In Pacific Island and Māori society - and again I’m talking in broad generalities (there are exceptions), ‘mana’ or prestige may hold a slightly higher place than property or power – although modern Māori, having lost most their land /property, now place a higher priority on property and power.

In Samoan society, the matai (chief selected by the wider family) carries the prestige (mana) of the family title and is given authority (power) over the use of family land but does not own the land (property). Mana/prestige is the primary value. ‘Mana’ is the more important value in Samoan society.

And you might like to ask yourself:

**What is the most important value in my life? Is it power? Property? Or prestige?
What do I value the most?**

**As I thought about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, I thought about how
Weber's theory might apply to Jesus.**

**How did power, property and prestige feature in Jesus' thinking and in Jesus' life, if
at all?**

I realize that it is hard to apply a social theory to Jesus, as the only records we have of him are the writings of his own disciples who depict him in a spiritual light – and not simply as a historical human figure. They depict the Jesus of faith (their faith).

From their descriptions of Jesus, we know that Jesus did not actively seek power, property or prestige, even though these were conferred on him by the early church and the church ever since.

He described himself as one who came to serve. He washed the feet of his disciples. He debunked the systems where the poor were exploited, unnoticed and disrespected. He gave a special place to women, children and pagans.(e.g. the Good Samaritan; the Syro-Phoenician woman etc).

He did not actively seek the favour of the holders of power, property or prestige.

This morning, we read the story of Jesus' baptism. At his Baptism Jesus received the divine power of the Holy Spirit and was driven by the Spirit, into the wilderness, to be tested by the Devil.

**In the desert Jesus had to decide or choose 'how' he would use his newly acquired
divine power.**

**Would he use the divine power to satisfy his own hunger and the temporary hunger
of the masses, by turning stones into bread?**

**Would he use the divine power to gain prestige by throwing himself down from the
temple steeple, in a spectacular miracle?**

**Would he use the divine power to gain property, described by the Devil as 'all the
kingdoms of the world, and their glory ?'**

**If Jesus had succumbed to any of the temptations, he would have been rejecting
God's power and glory.**

In the rest of the gospels, we do see a Jesus full of power, but he uses that power to heal, to bring about justice, to teach about love and how to serve others. He uses his power

the raise the dead and ultimately overcomes death himself, in the stories of the resurrection.

Ironically, we see Jesus' or Christ's greatest use of power in the powerlessness he displays in the last three days of his life, and in his crucifixion. The power of God displayed in Christ being crucified.

Today and as we journey through Lent, it is a good time to ask ourselves how we use the power that God has given us?

Do we use it to satisfy our own hungers and desires? Do we use our power to gain our own prestige? Do we bow to the temptations of power and property and the glory that comes with them?

What and who are the gods we worship?

In the final analysis, it is how we 'use' our three 'P's that matters.

I'm sure we can think of examples of people who hold great power, property and prestige, but who do not use their three P's in the spirit of Christ.

Man (people) cannot live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

You shall not put God to the test.

You shall worship the Lord your God and God only shall you serve.

I'd like to finish this Lenten reflection by quoting a well-known poem you may have already heard, but I think it answers the questions about what values were important to Jesus - and should be important to us as his followers.

One Solitary life (By Dr James Allen Francis)

He was born in an obscure village,
The child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in still another village,
Where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty.
Then for three years
He was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.

He never had a family or owned a house.
He didn't go to college.
He never visited a big city.
He never travelled two hundred miles
From the place where he was born.
He did none of the things
One usually associates with greatness.
He had no credentials but himself.
He was only thirty-three
When the tide of public opinion turned against him.
His friends ran away.
He was turned over to his enemies.
And went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross
Between two thieves.
While he was dying,
His executioners gambled for his clothing,
The only property he had on Earth.
When he was dead,
He was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend.
Twenty centuries have come and gone,
And today he is the central figure
Of the human race,
And the leader of mankind's progress.
All the armies that ever marched,
All the navies that ever sailed,
All the parliament that ever sat,
All the kings that ever reigned,
Put together have not affected
The life of man on Earth
As much as that
One Solitary Life.

PRAYER

Faithful God, you have spoken to us through Scripture and proclamation. Seal your Word within us, that we may walk in your ways, trust in your promises and follow Christ with renewed courage and hope. **Amen.**