On Friday, International Women’s Day, our Cathedral Assistant Emily had a great idea. She decided to use the cathedral blog to highlight the stories of biblical women. I don’t know if any of you read her blog, but it was a great overview of eight biblical women – some of them well known, and some less so, but all (like the men of the Bible) people of complexity and interest, in whom we can see God at work.

This is an excellent thing to do at any time – it’s always good to pay attention to Scripture, and perhaps especially to the parts of Scripture which we don’t read so regularly. But I’m glad that it fell at the beginning of Lent. Two days in, after we’d had a chance to recover from Ash Wednesday, we had the opportunity to remind ourselves of what it looks like when God is at work in people’s lives. In the life of Huldah, scholar and prophet; in the life of Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles; in the lives of warrior Judith, faithful Ruth, self-giving Mary; and more.

Reading these accounts reminds us that God is at work in the world and wants to be at work in our lives: and that is a good place to start at the beginning of Lent. However we keep Lent – whether by giving up something – chocolate, alcohol, meat, Facebook – or by taking up time for reflection, or rest, or prayer – Lent is all about a step back from the busyness of the rest of the year; about a striving for simplicity; and a reorientation towards God. How we step back depends on who we are, on what our lives are like, on what it is that gets in the way of our relationship with God. But however we step back, what we are really doing is re-centring and reorienting ourselves towards God. Recognising God at work in the world. Putting ourselves in God’s hands and offering God our selves.

The Gospel for this first Sunday of Lent is always about Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. We often read this as if the most important aspect was Jesus’ fasting – we hear fasting and take it as a model for whatever it is we are giving up. And there’s some truth in that. But I
think it’s more helpful to look at these forty days as Jesus’ step back, taken to reorient and re-centre himself.

When Jesus follows the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, it’s directly after his baptism. He has just taken his first steps in public ministry – he has been baptised and the Holy Spirit has rested on him, and the word of God from heaven has said: “you are my Son, the Beloved.” And the Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness. Not with the purpose of tempting him – with the purpose of giving him space.

Forty days in the wilderness is a radical step back from the very public affirmation of Jesus’ identity at his baptism. It’s a radical step back from the ministry that is to come.

It’s a step back for reorientation; for re-centring; for Jesus to settle himself again in the knowledge of who God is and who he is.

And I think that’s a much more helpful way to focus on Jesus in the wilderness as the model for our Lent: not as fasting, as giving things up; not even as praying, as taking up habits of prayer – though both of those might well be worth doing and might well be an important part of our Lent. But what Jesus in the wilderness is really modelling is a step back from busyness, into simplicity and a radical posture of trust in God.

But as we hear the narrative of Jesus in the wilderness, notice that he isn’t able to spend that time alone with God and himself. Somebody else creeps in.

A voice in his head; or a figure in the corner of his eye; or someone suddenly, startlingly, there in the middle of the wilderness, where just a moment ago there was nobody.

The devil tempts him three times.

You must be hungry.

You must be demoralised.

You must be just aching to show everyone how powerful you are.

What enables Jesus to resist that temptation?

Three things.

First: the experience he’s just had. He’s just been baptised; he’s just seen and heard the Holy Spirit descend, and God affirm in the hearing of everyone around, that Jesus is his beloved son.

Second: the Holy Spirit. Who has led him into the wilderness and doesn’t abandon him.
And third: Scripture.

Jesus is steeped in Scripture. He thinks in Scripture. He understands himself and his mission and his relationship with God, through the words of Scripture – the Hebrew Scriptures. So when he is tempted, his response is in the words of Scripture. Jesus speaks in the words of Scripture because he is himself the Word of God. Jesus resists temptation, not because he has a glib answer for everything, but because he is rooted and centred in Scripture: the Word of God his Father. And because he is rooted and centred in Scripture and in God, he is able to hold on to the affirmation he heard after his baptism. He’s able to trust in the presence of the sustaining Spirit. And he’s able to dismiss the alluring words of the tempter. Presented with competing visions of who he might be, he responds with security: he knows who he is, he is the Son of God; and he knows that this doesn’t mean cheap party tricks, satisfying his own hunger or stunt diving from the temple. The word of God in scripture arms Jesus for his time in the wilderness; arms Jesus against temptation; arms Jesus for the whole of his ministry.

So if we look to the forty days of our Lent in relationship with Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, let’s look at them as a step back into radical trust in God – God, revealed in Scripture. What I see in this text, like the other readings we heard this morning, is the importance of Scripture – and in particular, of the Hebrew Scriptures. Words that are inspired. Words that can root and centre us. Words that can demonstrate what it means when God gets involved in human lives – like those eight biblical women in Emily’s blog – and when God gets involved in the world – in Jesus. Words that are not always easy – words that are often as much human as divine. Words that reflect the culture from which they come, sometimes as much or more than they reflect God. Words that require us to think and pray and study. Words with which we must wrestle – words in which we see our own brokenness reflected. But as we see ourselves reflected in the words of Scripture, we also see ourselves sanctified and drawn into the life of God. We meet God, calling us to be made new. We are held by the Holy Spirit, sustaining us.

So as we keep Lent, in which we may have given things up; we may have taken things up; we may be seeking more simplicity – I hope that you are seeking more of God. And if you are seeking more of God, may I commend to you the study of Scripture. May you soak yourselves in Scripture: whether by reading a chapter a day, or a whole book through; a book you know well or a book you’ve never read before; by listening to the psalms and songs of the Bible, sung day by day at Evensong, and entering into the continuing prayer and study of the Church as we hear, day by day, the Word proclaimed. In whatever way you can, may
you commit yourself to the study of Scripture and in so doing, may you see more of God, who reveals himself through the word.

But if we do, we must be prepared for God to work through the word to change us. The Bible is not a safe book. Scripture is living and active; Scripture speaks of God, who is never still and never willing to allow us to be complacent. As we take a step back to centre and reorient ourselves, our new orientation towards God calls us to keep moving forward; if we truly see more of God, we must be prepared for God to demand a response. God promises to meet us and transform us – he doesn’t promise to let us stay the same.

So: may you keep a holy Lent. May it be a space for renewal, refreshment and reorientation. May you encounter God in the words of Scripture and the person of Jesus. And may you allow yourselves to be transformed by that encounter; and made ready to bring God’s transformation into the world.