

## **Stress Test**

We've heard a great deal about stress tests recently. From time to time the Bank of England conducts stress tests on high street banks -- scenarios that represent possible challenges to the financial security of the retail bank. The aim is to ensure that the financial condition on the bank is able to sustain its operations through a possible future financial storm.

We even have stress tests in the life of the church. Each church and each circuit has to publish a 'reserves policy', a level of financial 'savings' which will ensure that, in the worst case, the church will be able to meet its financial commitments.

I want to suggest that this 'stress test' idea might offer a fruitful way of looking at our journey through Lent. In this season of Lent we weave together two overlaid stress tests for Jesus himself. There is also a third stress test for Jesus – the very journey he took to Jerusalem. If we make the most of the opportunity, it gives us too a chance to carry out a stress test on ourselves, as part of our own spiritual journey through life.

Stress tests for Jesus? Well, there is first the episode we know as the baptism and temptations of Jesus. In travelling south from Galilee to the Jordan, Jesus was, in a sense, 'coming out', making public his growing inner sense that God has a very special destiny for him. This is a stressful experience indeed because it ran counter to everything he had been taught, and challenged everything that his fellow-countrymen might have expected. But having once 'gone public' in that way, Jesus was immediately led (drawn?) into another, even more severe and private stress test. The gospels of Matthew and Luke give us clues to what was going on in his head and how he might have felt challenged.

And of course, these stress tests were critical to preparing Jesus for the greatest stress test of all – a journey to the centre of Jewish faith in Jerusalem, knowing that his very reason for making this journey would be to throw down a gauntlet to the religious establishment. Here Jesus would be bidding for a place alongside the great prophets of the past – and things often took those prophets in a very uncomfortable direction.

So, during Lent, we have an extended time – seven weeks – to examine our own readiness to meet the challenges of life as a Christian, a follower of Jesus. The challenges we are preparing for probably don't match those faced by Jesus. Here are a few:

Our faithfulness to Jesus in our private and public declarations of faith, and our private and public actions.

Our resourcefulness in dealing with people who are both needy and difficult.

Our patience when listening to people in distress.

Our courage in speaking up against injustice.