

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February, LENT 1

Oscar Wilde famously said “ I can resist anything but temptation” . A saying I think we can all relate with! The very nature of temptation is its hard to resist-it’s designed to make you give in. Temptation is linked with the ideas of doing something we shouldn’t-something forbidden or banned. Rarely do we think of someone tempting us to do good! “Go on ! Why don’t you give away your best coat to that poor, cold homeless person on the street, go on!”

The whispers in our mind are more likely to be encouraging us that we can get away with a lie or ‘borrowing something’ that isn’t ours without asking permission, eating that chocolate or drinking that alcohol we gave up for Lent. It won’t do any harm the voice says. Well, that’s what the serpent told Eve about eating the forbidden fruit and look what that led to!

I am reminded of the comic book portrayal of a person being tempted - with an angel hovering one side of them and a little red demon the other side. The battle ensues with the demon tempting the character to do something bad and the angel reminding them of the consequences and trying to convince them to do right. It is portrayed as a battle between good and evil as are many of the stories in books, films, TV dramas, etc are. A familiar tale.

In biblical thought ‘to tempt’ means to test something or someone to determine or demonstrate their worth or faithfulness. Or it can mean an attempt by Satan to invite a person to sin like in my comic book example. In Hebrews we are told that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are but without sin. He resisted Satan’s invitation. In examining this passage more closely we can see in what ways he was invited to sin and how he resisted it. We can also see how he demonstrates his faithfulness to God-he proves his worth through the testing.

The gospel passage we read today was about Jesus being led into the desert by the Holy Spirit in preparation for his ministry. Luke places this event after Jesus baptism- the time he was acknowledged as God’s son and God’s love and acceptance of him was publicly proclaimed ‘ *You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased*’. Luke also lists Jesus’ lineage here as if to emphasise his credentials to the reader.

We are told Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights –a significant number in the Bible- In the flood narrative it rained for 40 days, Moses was up the mountain for 40 days, Nineveh was given 40 days to repent and Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness being ‘tested’. It is at this time when he is hungry that the devil comes to tempt Jesus. The version read today says ‘famished’ .Commentators see Jesus essentially being challenged about three things in these temptations: his identity, his means of obtaining the kingdom and his use of power. They are all temptations to doubt God’s will and intention for Jesus’ life and ministry.

The first temptation is about his identity and his use of power. He is being asked to prove who he is by using his God –given power and authority to turn the stones into bread –to meet his own physical need but also to use miracles to prove his identity. It's as if the devil is saying 'Come on –use what you've got to get what you want', but Jesus responds with words taken from scripture –he doesn't enter into an argument or discussion : “ *It is written : 'Man does not live on bread alone'* . In Matthew the words are added ‘*but on every word that comes from the mouth of god*’ . Jesus' need to eat is not a sin but how he obtains what he needs is important. Jesus recognises 1) that God will provide and he needs to trust him to provide what is necessary 2) he doesn't need to prove who he is by miracle working-that is the wrong way to establish his identity. Jesus is willing to wait – to do his father's will is his bread.

In the second temptation Jesus is taken to the mountain top –traditionally in the bible place of prayer and God's presence. A 'shortcut' is offered him- that he can obtain the kingdoms of this world if he worships Satan. Jesus sought to establish a kingdom –God's kingdom on this earth. Many of his parables illustrated what this kingdom was like. Jesus wasn't seeking to be king of the kind of kingdom he was being offered by Satan. Jesus answered again from Deuteronomy. It is written ‘*worship the Lord your God and serve him only.*’ The same sentiment echoed in the Lord's prayer that Jesus taught his disciples - *Our father who art in heaven, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*’ What Jesus taught and modelled to his disciples was servant leadership-that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and offer his life as a ransom for many. Obedience to his Father was his ministry.

In the third temptation Jesus is led to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem-the place where his earthly ministry would end. The devil questions his identity again ‘if you are the son of god’ and using scripture tempts Jesus to put God's word to the test . What a sensational event it would be- a sky jump without a parachute and God sending his angels to rescue him. Another shortcut being offered- A sign to prove he is the Messiah and God's son-what a sensational way to launch his ministry. But Jesus responds again with the word of God ‘*do not put the Lord your God to the test*’ . Not only is Jesus not prepared to ‘prove himself’ in the wrong way ‘ he is not going to ask God, his father to prove himself either. On the cross once again Jesus is challenged by bystanders with the same temptation- ‘if he is the son of God, let him get God to come and rescue him- to prove he is who he says he is. He resists right to the end continuing to obey and trust God –not demanding to be rescued from the cross.

Luke ends the passage by telling us when the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. This suggests he will be back. That Jesus will continue to face temptation to take the easy way, the shortcut, to doubt who he is and use his power to prove his identity. Satan is tempting him from taking the way of the cross, he is tempting him to abandon his true mission and ministry - but Jesus resists –there is no shortcut to salvation. He will be challenged time and time again- particularly by the Pharisees- about His identity, his teaching, his authority, his use of power e.g ‘ to heal the sick on the sabbath’ . He will also face the cross and that will require all these

temptations have been overcome before the ultimate testing of all- he will have to trust he is doing his father's will even when he no longer feels his presence.

*Why have you forsaken me?* he cries out on the cross, before commending his spirit to his Father in trust at the last breath. He was tempted but he never gave in –he never sinned – he proved his faithfulness and was worthy to win our salvation for us. We are eternally grateful he did it God's way, not his way, not the way Satan was tempting him to go. It's no accident the gospel reading for today is the temptation of Christ- we wouldn't be looking forward to Easter today, there would be no Lent if Jesus had yielded to those temptations.

We are in the days of lent- 40 days – they are a time of preparation for us- for celebrating Easter and all its suffering but also the glory of the resurrection. We are invited to 'walk with Jesus' through this time – as disciples we too are called to the way of the cross. There are no shortcuts for us-no easy life just because we are Christians. We are loved, we are children of God but our trust in God-who he is and who we are will be tested. In difficult times-we may be tempted to do things our way – to doubt our identity as children of God, to put God to the test, to find another God to worship who doesn't make demands of us. It will also be an opportunity to choose the right pathway –to trust our heavenly Father. There is no shortcut to the victory and glory of Easter without passing through its pain and sorrow.

We have many opportunities to pray, to reflect, and face our own 'devils'- whatever they may be -during this period of Lent. Jesus used the word of God to fight temptation and I'd encourage you to take up the Bishop of St Albans 2010 challenge to learn and study a passage of scripture everyday. To discover our identity afresh as children of God, to re-establish our trust in Him for our needs to be met, to reaffirm our trust in Him for our salvation, to commit ourselves anew to obedience and living the kingdom life are all ways we can respond to the call to be his disciples.

Let us pray:

Lead us not into temptation,  
rather guide us into the pathways of justice,  
love and peace during these Lenten days.

Give us the grace to be faithful  
to our God & Father in heaven.  
Give us courage to accept who we really are  
and where we should be. Amen