

Matthew 4v1-11: The Temptations of Jesus

Lots of Sundays during the Church year have titles; Palm Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, Trinity Sunday... and if this first Sunday of Lent were to get its own name, it would not be 'Chocolate Sundae', in case you were hoping that, but would have to be 'Temptation Sunday'. Four days into our freshly decided upon Lenten disciplines from Ash Wednesday, we get the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, along with Jesus' time in the wilderness. Today there is temptation all around us, and you know what Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything, except temptation."

OPENING PRAYER: Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe; we bow in your presence. May the words I speak be those you want spoken; may the words we hear be those you want heard; and may each of us be ready to live to your praise and glory. Amen.

Adam and Eve, the snake and the apple is one of those stories that we all remember from Sunday School. But do we really know this story? The fruit that was bitten... was it an apple? Well... no. It was a piece of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but because some Renaissance painter took the liberty of making the fruit an apple, we now 'remember' the story that way. And whose 'fault' was it? Eve's? Was it Adam's? Well... for me it really didn't matter who took the first bite... neither one of them was able to resist temptation. And the temptation wasn't to eat something forbidden, or even to disobey God's rules, instead, they were tempted to want to be God, or at least be like God.

And just as Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden, so would we be... because human nature is to fail at resisting temptation, especially the temptation to be God, to rule our own lives and choose our own way.

When we think of temptation during this season of Lent, we generally think of those things we have given up, that now come to us in greater measure, tempting us to break our Lent vows. Have you given up chocolate? That's why the supermarket shelves seem overlaid with chocolate, and it's tempting to give in. Or you give up alcohol and suddenly, people you haven't seen for months are calling you up to invite

you to come around or go out for a drink. We become fixated on what we cannot have, making it very difficult to stay away from temptation.

But these are not really temptations of any great significance. The temptations that are important are Adam and Eve's – and Jesus'.

Jesus has just been baptised by John and ringing in his ears are God the Father's words of affirmation, 'This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased', and then it is into the wilderness, where Jesus is to discover what it means to be the Beloved Son.

The wilderness was a symbolic place etched into the very psyche of the people of Israel who had stepped out of the Red Sea and into forty years wandering in the wilderness learning more about their destiny, much in the same way as Jesus must now learn his. For Israel, the wilderness was a place where things fell apart, where they were enticed into idolatry, social injustice and spiritual adultery. Time and time again, their actions betrayed their lack of faith.

Now Jesus is to be tested and what we witness is his humanity and vulnerability as the Devil attempts to ensnare Jesus, subtly manipulating him so that he will abandon his holy reliance on the Father in order to entertain an unholy alliance with the Devil.

Jesus had been fasting forty days and forty nights before the temptation began. Matthew tells us he was hungry. No kidding! I have a tough time going from sunrise to sunset without food. In this weakened state the devil shows his guile and cunning, seeking to out-manoeuvre Jesus. But, of course, Jesus knew the devil and his deceitful ways.

Theologically, each temptation is rich in meaning. The first invites Jesus to turn stones into bread. But this isn't about hunger, it's about whether Jesus is going to trust God, or co-opt God's power and change the nature of a rock for his own purposes, to abuse the goodness of creation with selfish greed. But Jesus resists temptation and moves on – still weak and hungry, but trusting God.

The second invites Jesus to cast himself off the roof of the temple, the Devil's attempt to get Jesus to use his God-given power to put on a show and make people believe that he was supernatural, to bring mistrust into

the relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. And Satan even quotes Scripture to Jesus when he tempts him. He says, “I know God’s Word too and in Psalm 91 it says the angels will guard you.” Again Jesus resists temptation by wisely turning from party tricks to trust in God’s real providence.

And finally, the tempter offers Jesus the whole world to rule if he would fall down before him and worship him, attempting to confuse that power which comes from the kingdoms of this world with the power which belongs to God alone, tempting Jesus to take all of God’s power and God’s place in the world. Of course, Satan doesn’t really have the authority to make this offer to Jesus because the world and all that is in it belongs to God, and Jesus knows and trusts that.

These stories are meant to tell us that it is in our human nature to want to be God, to rule our own lives and choose our own way. Adam and Eve were promised that they would be like God, if only they would eat from the same tree God ate from; and Jesus was promised all of the attributes of God – ability to change nature to suit his own purposes; angels to serve him; and the adoration of the world – if only they would allow themselves to take God’s place.

In the end, neither bribery nor manipulation can distract Jesus from pursuing that destiny to which God has called him. He emerges from the wilderness having demonstrated unswerving love and obedience to the Father.

But what of you and I? How might the Devil seek to drive a wedge between us and God? I doubt it will be bread and stones, and temples and angels, and overtly bowing down to the devil? Satan is far too subtle in his dealings with us. I think that our temptation is much more individually tailored: bespoke rather than off-the-peg. It preys on and exploits our individual weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, and what those are will be dependent on the person I am, the person you are; relationships, values, desires, priorities. How you and I respond to temptation can sometimes have life-changing consequences. That said, temptation is more often a slippery slope than a crossroads.

In 'The Screwtape Letters', CS Lewis' humorous and imagined correspondence between a senior Demon, Screwtape, and his nephew, Wormwood, an apprenticed tempter, Lewis suggests that any demon worth his salt is less interested in getting you and I to commit spectacular sins. Rather, 'the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts'. It will be in the little things, in the details, the small print that the devil will seek to win us over, to persuade us to let go of our trusting walk with God and seek a sense of self-control, self-governance, no matter how illusory that sense may be.

This Lent, you and I are giving the opportunity to take a real, honest look at ourselves, and to give ourselves to being more like Christ, to take the opportunity to reflect on what the Devil has and does dangle before us in order to tempt us away from God and seek self-governance and a pathway that is not God's best and first choice for us.

Lent is an opportunity to get our life back on track, and with God help, make the wise choices and take the right pathway.

We should be confident, not afraid for, thanks be to God in Jesus Christ, we do not have to battle with our dark side alone. We are the Body of Christ... held by and in Christ and so share what he has already won for us. We have the Holy Spirit, This is what gives us confidence as we prepare ourselves to refuse and resist what the Devil might offer you and me, this day, tomorrow, this coming week, as he strives to tempt us away from God?

So I ask, what might the Devil might be offering you. Be prepared, gird yourself, so that you may take your stand and resist his slippery temptations. And choose the right pathways... for it leads to life in all its abundant fulness.

As it says in this morning's Collect and we pray again:

Closing Prayer: O God, come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know our weaknesses, may each one of us find you mighty to save. Amen.