

THE SERMON - Lent 1, Year A – February 26th, 2023.

Readings: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5: 12-21; Matthew 4: 1-11

How are you at resisting temptation? If you are like me, it rather depends on what the temptation is! If it is food ... I'm probably not so good at resisting 'nibbles', especially around 3 pm to just before dinner! And if there is cheese involved, I'm history!!

Our readings today, as is traditional for this first Sunday in Lent, dwell on the temptations which come humanities way, and how we deal with them.

How do you cope if you are faced with temptation? What do you do if you give way to temptation and then are caught out? Are you ready to take responsibility for your misdeeds or do you look for the most convenient scapegoat?

I don't know if it is a female thing, but I object to getting the blame for what happened in the Garden of Eden!

"She gave it to me" ... "the serpent tricked me" ...

In the story no one wants to take responsibility and you can almost hear the serpent chuckling as it slithers away!

The usual interpretation of this passage is that it was to explain, when God created the world and saw it was good, why there was evil, pain and suffering in the world. The evil, pain and suffering in the world is as real today as it was at the start of the human adventure. The testing comes to all of us even as it came to Jesus the Christ, true God and yet truly human and vulnerable.

We must remember that temptation in itself is not bad, it is one of the forces which mould us into who we are - it is whether or not we give in to the temptation which is important.

Paul in his letter to the Romans, sets out to compare Adam's sin with Christ's saving action. The main import of the passage is the saving grace, the power of Christ, which outweighs the burden of human sin. At baptism the Christian is re-introduced into the paradise of God's intimate friendship and love. The last Adam has won back much more than what the first Adam had forfeited.

So, our gospel completes the message. In the first two readings we were invited to face up to the evil of sin, and to renew our faith and confidence in the remedy provided by God - final victory through Christ.

One commentator suggests that the Gospel reading describes the first great encounter between Jesus and the forces of evil, and says that instead of the temptations of Jesus, the passage should be called "the Testing of God's Son".

For whatever reason, Jesus was approximately 29 or 30 (or so tradition would have it) when he decides to leave home to search out his cousin John. John, at that stage, was preaching a message of repentance and was baptising in the river Jordan. Jesus comes to John and is baptised by full immersion. As he comes out of the water, we are told that:

the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
[Matthew 3: 16&17].

We are then told that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted and prayed and was tempted by the devil.

He had just had an amazing experience and affirmation at his baptism:

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" [Matthew 3:17]

and now he needed time to work out the path of his ministry, the path which would allow him to fulfil God's purposes through him.

When you think of it, the temptations which scripture records are quite logical.

He had been fasting for some time, he was hungry, he was God's beloved Son, why not turn that rock into a loaf of bread who would know?

His ministry would be for the lost in Israel, God's chosen people, what better way to get their attention than to throw himself off the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews' most sacred site? Everyone would see or hear about it and the miracle of him not just surviving but being totally unhurt! Who would be hurt by that spectacular occurrence ... no one, but the sensation would reach everyone in a hurry, but it wouldn't last!

His ministry would ultimately reach the ends of the world, why not take the short cut and bow to the one who ruled the world? He could right the misconceptions and lies of the tempter it would save time, literally centuries

But it wasn't the way of love, it wasn't in God's purposes to take easy short cuts!

Jesus emerges from the wilderness victor - he will not use his sonship to his own advantage, there will be no short cuts in his ministry. And yet as he was tempted in the wilderness and refused to use his powers, during his ministry there are times when each of those situations are matched:

- he would not turn stones into bread for himself - but he fed 5000 and 4000 people on separate occasion with very little.
- he would not throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple to test God's protection of him - and yet when the lynch mob at Nazareth were set to throw him off a cliff, he was able to walk through them unharmed (it was not yet his time) - it is also interesting to note that when he was on the Cross and suffering the taunts and derision of the crowd to save himself, he refused because it was not God's will;
- upon the mountain he would not worship Satan - but in another situation, he took Peter, James and John up the mountain and showed them his glory at the Transfiguration.

Jesus' time in the wilderness and his testing shaped him and what his ministry would be.

I believe we are all shaped by our experiences, our nature and nurture, both as individuals and as communities and even nations.

I remember a conversation, some years ago, with my Spiritual Director which at the time was quite profound.

We believe that we have been made in the image of God, and that the God who created the Universe is interested in having a relationship with us. I was mulling over the fact that I think the greatest lesson I have learnt over the last few years is that I can only be me, and I have to honour and be true to the person God created me to be. That is the same for all of us. It sounds so logical and easy that you may think 'so what'! But while it is true, so often we are put into positions where the expectations of others, let alone our own hopes and doubts, can skew who we think we should be or how we should act in any given situation.

When I first became a parish priest, I was confronted with this. My style of leadership, of being the "Parish Priest" is very different from those countless men and women who have gone before me. At the time it caused friction and difficulties, with people who have preconceived ideas about how I should conduct myself, or they felt they knew how things should be. Needless to say, I nearly came a cropper trying to fulfil other people's expectations until I came to realise that I had to be true to who God had called me to be, and my own style is as valid as anyone else.

Who can remember God's answer to Moses from the burning bush when Moses asked God his name? God said: "I am who I am".

I believe we make progress, when we can genuinely say: "I am who I am" and accept that God has created us all unique individuals – after all, wouldn't it be boring if we were all the same?!

During the time of fasting, prayer and contemplation, Jesus' path became clear to him and so was able to fight against the temptations to take short cuts.

While on the one hand, Jesus gives us the example of refusing to put God to the test, instead trusting that God would be with him, trusting that God would make known what was required of him.

Our greatest sin may be our disobedience to truly be who God created us to be and to fulfil our true purpose - not accepting the role God has called us to, trying to be something other than what we were created to be or do. After all, just think who we are disobeying, the awesome power that we are meddling with - the power of the Creator, the power of the resurrection, the power of the still small voice - the power of love!

This Lent, let us take responsibility for our decisions and may the transforming power of God, truly make a difference in our lives. Amen.

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