

Into Temptation

28 2 10

Almighty God,
whose Son, Jesus Christ, fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save.

My text may be found in Luke chapter 4 and verses 1& 2: 'Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.'

Oscar Wilde said 'I can resist anything but temptation'. Good jokes have the ring of truth because if temptation wasn't in itself an attractive option, why would anyone be tempted?

Lent is the time for spiritual examination; a time to take a long cool look at ourselves and to see where we are, to check what we are up to. It is no accident that after his baptism but before his public ministry, Jesus spent time alone in the wilderness to test his vocation. Jesus had a job to do; he was discerning the right way to do it. There are three recorded temptations: turning stones to bread; jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple; worshipping the devil. But there were many more in the forty days of testing which are not recorded. The purpose of

my sermon this morning, however, is not to look at the Temptations of Jesus but instead to consider a line of the Lord's prayer which for some of us in the congregation is rather disturbing: 'Lead us not into temptation'.

Let me say from the start that I love the Lord's Prayer and I love the certainty of the traditional language form of the Lord's Prayer from which I have just quoted. This prayer, learnt by heart when I was a small boy, has a power of expression, an echo of security, that any new translation cannot hope to capture. That said, we do have a problem in this particular line because it seems to imply that God is leading us into temptation, that God is actually tempting us to sin. And surely that can't be right. A God who loves us, a God who is our father, a God who wants to welcome us home, is hardly going to be a God who wants to trip us up, to tempt us with the very real temptations of this material world: food, drink, money, power and sex to name but five!

The world that God has created is indeed a wonderful world in which so much is good, so much is the source of pleasure. But everything that God has created can be used badly: food can be eaten to excess or we can starve ourselves; we can become alcoholic, possessively greedy; abuse power for our own ends and use sex as a source of selfish gratification rather than an act of mutual giving and bonding. So there are temptations: many, varied, attractive. But the point of my sermon is this: I don't believe that God is tempting us or God is leading us into temptation. The temptation is clearly there and we are led and guided by God but temptation is of the devil, by which I understand that which destroys, diminishes belittles all that we could be as Children of God.

The Lord's Prayer may be found in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. The Greek word they both use for lead is 'εισφερω' ('eisphero') which means literally to bear, to carry into. So we have an image of God carrying us in his arms as a parent might carry his child: it is an image of cherishing not one of harm. The Greek Matthew and Luke use for temptation is 'πειρασμος' ('peirasmos') which means trial or proof. So we have an image of a court of law where we are being tested to discover if we are true or wilfully perjured individuals. So underpinning this particular line of the Lord's Prayer, 'lead us not into temptation', is an image of God the Father who cherishes us but who has designed a world in which our worth is tested. In short, I don't think that God is the tempter but God has created us with the possibility of being tempted. And this is perfectly in line with the idea that we are free to choose and that we can choose rightly or wrongly.

In Common Worship, the Church of England preserves the traditional wording of the Lord's prayer 'Lead us not into temptation' in both contemporary and traditional language forms. It has abandoned earlier attempts at modernisation, 'Do not bring us to the time of trial'. Last week The Revd Mark Vidal-Hall pointed me in the direction of the New Zealand Prayer book left in the vestry by Bishop Tom Brown when he did a chaplaincy here. The translation is more of a paraphrase but it might be a better rendering of the sentiment: 'Save us from the time of trial.'

Today on this Second Sunday in Lent, we have considered the fact of temptation, that like Jesus we are tempted and that we always have a choice. It is true that like Jesus we are lead by the Spirit. It is true we are Children of God cherished by

God but the fact is we are and will be tempted in a way which shows who we truly are. It is not God who tempts us but our prayer to him is to be saved from that testing, not that we won't be tested but that we may emerge intact and whole from that testing, justified by his grace, persevered by his love.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 21: Temptation

