

Temptation

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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 today is Matthew chapter 4 and verse 1: 'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.'

What tempts you ? What do you find tempting ? I guess temptation is going to be a question of individual preference. I imagine that each of us has a particular weakness or weaknesses which may or may not have changed over a period of time but in a large enough congregation, we would probably find the whole range of possibilities. What is true is that for a temptation to be tempting, it has to appeal to us. So we may well smile at someone else's weakness because, quite frankly, andouille is not to our taste but the thought of croissant or brioche or tarte au pomme may well make us salivate !

Temptation is tempting simply because it is a choice we want to make. Temptation satisfies a perceived desire. Giving in to temptation may not prove to be the best choice for us. Alcohol is wonderful gift but to an alcoholic, it is a

necessary drug and ultimately a poison to the liver as sadly George Best, the former Manchester United footballer, found to his cost. In our reading from Genesis, Eve and Adam were to find that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may have been tempting to look at, may have tasted great at first but would leave an aftertaste that would spoil the paradise in which they lived.

The three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are interesting to consider in the light of the question: why are they tempting? Of course, forty days is a long time to be alone with your thoughts and who knows what bad thoughts may have tempted Jesus. But three we know and to those three let us turn.

The first is obvious – Satan says to Jesus If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread. I love bread. Each morning, I satisfy my hunger by breakfasting on fresh French bread. To a hungry man, what could be nicer? So Satan says to Jesus: you're hungry so satisfy your hunger by eating bread. The problem is the nearest baker is a long way off so the only way to get bread is to make some himself by turning stones into loaves. He has the power to do so; later on, Jesus has no problem multiplying five small loaves, bread rolls I guess, into sufficient bread to feed 5,000 ! The temptation is tempting because it focuses on a genuine need – the need to eat to live – but there is also another temptation implicit here. It lies in the word 'if'. Jesus has spent 40 days in the Wilderness preparing himself for his public ministry. Is he truly who he thinks he is; is he truly who he feels he is, the Son of God ? Satan is penetratingly clever to try to sow the seed of doubt and to ask for a sign that to demonstrate the truth. That 'if' will appear again in the 2nd and 3rd temptations.

In Matthew's gospel, Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem for the second temptation. The temptation again is simple and sharp. Satan says 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you'

And 'On their hands they will bear you up.' '

Do a miracle and prove to the astonished crowd below that you are the Son of God. Now Jesus did perform many miracles some of which the gospels record so why should this invitation be such a temptation ? All of Jesus miracles were designed to have a double purpose. They were a good in themselves in that they were miracles of healing in which the blind could see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak and the lame walk or in that they were miracles over nature in which the storm was stilled and lives saved or a child raised from the dead and a life was restored. So what was wrong here ? it was simply abusing his status and God's love by a display of extraordinary power reducing the Messiah to a magician or conjuror.

The third temptation is about achieving power but by the wrong means. From a high mountain, Satan shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and says: 'All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me'. Tempting? To achieve the submission of all the kingdoms of the world would thereby establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Good idea ? Not ! And why ? Because it would achieve what he ultimately purposes to achieve but by being compromised by worshipping, by respecting Satan. The whole plan of God's salvation would fall before it got off

the ground. Clever or what ? But not clever because the means do not justify the end.

So let me end with this reflection. Temptations are temptations because they are profoundly attractive to those who like, want or need what tempts them. Each time Satan tempted Jesus it was to offer him something he wanted but to take what is offered, as Adam took the apple from Eve, would be to ruin what was truly good. So the next time you are tempted by whatever tempts you, it would be wise to reflect whether what seems nice to you is also good for you?

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 23: Temptation

