

Into 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 a phrase from the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer:

' into temptation'

So what tempts you ? What do you think about temptation ? How do you make sense of the Lord's Prayer that we have known off by heart since we are children – of the phrase **'and lead us not into temptation'** that is at the heart of today's sermon – **into temptation ?**

Well, today is the First Sunday in Lent and temptation is very much the subject of our readings from chapter three of the Book of Genesis and chapter four of the Gospel according to St Matthew. Genesis is an account of Eve's temptation by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Matthew is an account of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the Wilderness.

Eve has been told that she and Adam may not eat of the fruit of the tree that stands in the centre of the Garden of Eden. They may eat freely of every tree in the garden save that of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Having been told not to, it is not impossible for the crafty serpent to tempt Eve with the prospect of eating forbidden fruit. After all, it looks temptingly tasty, so good to eat, and it will grant her God-like knowledge – eat the fruit and her eyes will be opened and she will know good and evil. Silly, but she falls for it and gives some fruit to Adam who foolishly accepts it and they both know straight away that they are naked so they have to cover themselves up to hide what they now know should not be on display.

Jesus is about to embark on his public ministry but first his understanding of what it is to be the Messiah is being tested. Three temptations are listed by Matthew which I'm sure you know: turn stones to bread; jump off the pinnacle of the Temple; fall down and worship the devil. The first is selfish; the second is to doubt; the third to get the right result by the wrong means. All three are tempting but Jesus resists falling into each trap by citing scripture as a basis of why he won't do what the devil is tempting him to do.

So we have the example of Adam and Eve fall from grace because they are tempted by what looks good but isn't. We have the example of Jesus who doesn't fall for the tricks of the devil because he knows what's good and sticks to it. But let me ask you again what tempts you ? I can't say for certain though I could guess: money, power and sex are the usual three that we as people find attractive. Instead, let me share with you one thing that tempts me as a priest.

I'm tempted to focus on the good side of God. Being of a sunny disposition, by character an optimist, I want to look on the bright side: God's love for us; his grace freely given; the possibility of forgiveness; the chance to serve him; the fact that we're being called home to be with the one who loves us. Now that is nice and it's a very positive view of our faith in a loving God whom we can call Our Father.

But Lent, Holy Week and Easter have some sharp reminders of what it means to be human: yes we may feel joy of being embodied and that is part of the paradise which was the Garden of Eden. But if we can feel pleasure, then we are also open to feel pain. And in the incarnation that is precisely what God was doing – opening himself up to feel truly what it is to be human. We don't have an example of Jesus smiling or laughing but when the Syrophenician woman suggests that even the dogs under the table get to eat the scraps of food that fall to the floor, I can imagine him smiling. And his image of a camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle is a great joke if you understand what's actually being said so why wouldn't Jesus laugh at the ridiculous? But we know he cried outside the tomb of his friend Lazarus. John 11 v35 is the shortest verse in the Bible – **'Jesus wept.'** We know he was hurt when a temple guard struck him in the face at his trial before the Sanhedrin. We know he was hurt when he was stripped and whipped by the Roman guards and was nailed to the cross. We know he fell exhausted three times on his way to be crucified so that Simon of Cyrene had to carry the cross for him. We know at times he was hungry and thirsty. And worst of all, the perfect uninterrupted communion with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit was broken when the weight of sin cut him off from his sense of the Trinity.

If Jesus, therefore, as a human being suffered, why should we think it will be any different for us ? If we are human, fact is we can feel and not all that we feel will be nice. My temptation as a priest is to ignore the nasty, tricky bits and to concentrate on just what's nice. Tempting, I admit but let each day our prayer be - lead us not into temptation.

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

Preached at the Parish Eucharist

St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar

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