

Lent I 2019

Oscar Wilde famously said, “I can resist anything but temptation”. A saying I think we can all relate to! The very nature of temptation is hard to resist-it is designed to make you give in. Temptation is linked to the idea of doing something we should not do-something forbidden or banned. Do we ever think of someone tempting us to do good?

“Go on! Why don’t you give away your best coat to that poor, cold, homeless person on the street, go on, I dare you”

The whispers in our mind are more likely to be encouraging us that we can get away with a lie or borrowing something that isn’t ours without asking permission, eating that chocolate or drinking that alcohol we gave up for Lent. It won’t do any harm the voice says. Well, that’s what the serpent told Eve about eating the forbidden fruit and look what that led to?

I am reminded of the comic book portrayal of a person being tempted - with an angel hovering one side of them and a little red demon the other side. The battle ensues with the demon tempting the character to do something bad and the angel reminding them of the consequences and trying to convince them to do right. It is portrayed as a battle between good and evil as are many of the stories in books, films, TV dramas, etc. A familiar tale.

In biblical thought to tempt means to test something or someone to determine or demonstrate their worth or faithfulness. Or it can mean an attempt by Satan to invite a person to sin like in my comic book example. In Hebrews we are told that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are but without sin. He resisted Satan's invitation. In examining this passage more closely we can see in what ways he was invited to sin and how he resisted it. We can also see how he demonstrates his faithfulness to God-he proves his worth through the testing.

The gospel passage we read today was about Jesus being led into the desert by the Holy Spirit in preparation for his ministry. Luke places this event after Jesus baptism- the time he was acknowledged as God’s son and God’s love and acceptance of him was publicly proclaimed,

“You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased”.

We are told Jesus fasted for forty days and nights –a significant number in the Bible- In the flood narrative it rained for forty days, Moses was up the

mountain for forty days, Nineveh was given forty days to repent and Israel spent forty years in the wilderness.

It is at this time, when he is hungry, that the devil comes to tempt Jesus. Some biblical commentators see Jesus essentially being challenged about three things in these temptations: his identity, his means of obtaining the kingdom and his use of power. They are all temptations to doubt God's will and intention for Jesus' life and ministry.

The first temptation is about his identity and his use of power. He is being asked to prove who he is by using his God-given power and authority to turn the stones into bread, to meet his own physical need but also to use miracles to prove his identity.

"It is written "Man does not live on bread alone". In Matthew the words are added „but on every word that comes from the mouth of God".

In the second temptation Jesus is taken to the mountain top –traditionally in the bible place of prayer and God's presence. An offer is made by Satan that he can obtain the kingdoms of this world if he worships him. Jesus sought to establish a kingdom, God's kingdom on earth and many of his parables illustrate what this kingdom was like.

Jesus answered again from Deuteronomy. It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."

What Jesus taught his disciples was servant leadership-that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and offer his life as a ransom for many. Obedience to his Father was his ministry.

In the third temptation Jesus is led to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem where his earthly ministry would end. Satan questions his identity again

"if you are the son of God"

What a sensational event it would be. Jesus responds again with the word of God;

"Do not put the lord your God to the test".

We are in the season of Lent which is a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter and all its suffering but also the glory of the resurrection. We are invited to walk with Jesus his final entry to Jerusalem as we recall the way of the cross.

I hope that you will share with us as we explore through our Lent discussion groups. I hope that our faith will be deepened as we think about the temptations that we experience that detract from the quality of our lives and pray that we will have the strength to resist the lure of Satan, in the same way that Jesus did.

As the introductory words to Compline, with which Hugh will end his Thursday evening Lent Discussion group sessions here in church, remind us;

“Brethren, be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist, steadfast in the faith.” 1 St. Peter 5. 8, 9.

And finally, a thought for the week;

If you are wise, you should endeavour to be more a reservoir than a canal. A canal spreads abroad water as soon as it receives it, but a reservoir waits until it is filled before overflowing and, as a result, without loss to itself communicates its superabundant water. In the Church of the present day we have many canals, but few reservoirs.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

Amen.