

Overcoming temptation

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

What is it for you? Is it chocolate. Is it that dark, unctuous slightly bitter taste; or the soft, silky creaminess of milk chocolate; or is it the sugary sweet, childhood memory of milk chocolate, mild and rich? Is it wine – the rich, luscious reds or the slightly flinty sharp taste of a good white? Is it whisky, the smooth warmth of Speyside or Campbeltown, or the peaty, rich tar flavours of the Islay malts? Is it the juniper berry that entrances you with the sparkle of tonic? Is it the baker's shop, with the wafting aroma of so many breads, and the bejewelled array of cakes and tarts and pies and pastries.

That's a whole lot of temptation in one paragraph. I can hear you salivating from here.

Temptation comes in many forms. New clothes, books, the latest music, shoes, cars, holidays, so often hovering around possessions. You will know what it is for you.

Temptation comes in other forms. The temptation to have the last word in every argument. The temptation to believe that you are always right, even when you say that you know that is not the case. The temptation to look after yourself first rather than consider the needs of others. The temptation to take the easy option and cut a corner rather than doing a job properly and seeing it through to the end. The temptation to judge. The temptation to criticise rather than to praise. The temptation to walk by on the other side and not get involved. The temptation to laziness, or indecisiveness and putting everything further and further. The temptation to take on too much, or to think that you're indispensable, or bury yourself in work to avoid resolving other issues. The temptation not to listen to inconvenient truths, and gloss over challenging facts.

“Rembrandt drew several depictions of the devil tempting Jesus. In one of them the two look like friends. They appear to be ambling down a country road, deep in conversation. The devil is half a step behind Jesus. His head is skeletal, but there is an urgent, deeply human look on his face. He is reasoning with Jesus, not menacing Him. One of His wings is thrown over Jesus' shoulder in an almost familial manner. He leans in, mouth open slightly, eyes on Christ, speaking quietly,

a heavy stone in his hands. He holds the stone out as if it were a gift. “If You’re the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”¹

This is what temptation is like, powerfully intimate. There’s nothing monstrous about it on the face of things, it often looks reasonable on the scale of what is permissible. That’s the way most of our temptations appear. It’s all too plausible. Jesus is tempted here: to sacrifice the truth of Who He is for material gain, or prestige, or power.

The story about Jesus’ temptation, and how He chose to overcome it, reveals something about God. Jesus, in the face of temptation, chose not to go down that road, but chose another, that would lead Him to the cross, and beyond.

Instead of choosing the power and the authority and the control that we expect of God, Jesus chose ultimate weakness, ultimate vulnerability and ultimate sacrifice. To the temptations of economic, political or spiritual authority, Jesus says no. The mightiness of God is not what we would expect, maybe not even what we want.

In the face of the ills and evils of the world, God faces the temptation of fixing everything and chooses a different path. Christians who idolise charitable giving or social justice are faced with Jesus saying, in this instance, ‘no’ to the temptation that was placed before Him. Christians might want God to side with their efforts in achieving economic equality, but in this instance of temptation, Jesus ‘no’. To Christians in different countries who see God as being on their side, and supporting their principles, and you need only look at some of the comments made by Presidential hopefuls in the United States, Jesus avoids the temptation of narrow nationalism and declines to become the ruler of *any* nation. To Christians who long for some kind of supernatural ‘fix’ for all the faults and problems of the world, Jesus avoids the temptation and says ‘no’.

Imagine if Jesus hadn’t said ‘no’. “If Jesus had agreed to any of the devil’s offers, he would have become an ancient revolutionary, a skilful politician, or a beloved magician. He would have become an unusually powerful person, which is not really that unusual. Every age is replete with

powerful people.”ⁱⁱ We are invited to wonder if, in two thousand years, any will remember their names or sing hymns to them in worship.

By overcoming temptations, Jesus’ story sets on its road to the cross. Had Jesus responded differently to the temptations, His story would have ended differently. By refusing to practice human power, Jesus made Himself vulnerable to human power. The path chosen was vulnerability, and in that vulnerability, Jesus overcomes. He does not give in to temptation, but the path He chose forces His reliance on God to sustain and help – the long way round – not the short and easy route.

Is this a story about God’s incapacity? I think it is a story about how God’s powerlessness calls from us a response to do something ourselves. Jesus saying ‘no’ to temptation led Him to the cross, and gave us an example that has endured for over two thousand years.

By not giving in to the easy path, by sticking to the hard road, the better thing comes. By being open about our weakness and our frailty and our need for help, the good in others is often drawn out to respond with help, just as we are drawn to help those who are frightened, weak and vulnerable themselves.

Resisting temptation took determination, and it left Jesus vulnerable and at the mercy of the cruelty of the world. The ridicule and the marginalisation started then, and continues now. And yet, it seems to me, it is because of His example, to this day, people are still inspired to come forward, and join together, and offer help, and make a difference.

I mentioned last week the occasion of Desmond Tutu addressing the 2009 General Assembly. He spoke of the weak, vulnerable Jesus, calling all people to Him, and the fact that this vulnerable Saviour had no hands, no eyes, no feet, no mouth, no heart without our hands, our eyes, our feet, our mouths, our hearts. “I have no one, I have no one except you. Help me, help me, help me to make this a more generous world; help me, help me to make this a more compassionate, caring world. Help me, help me. I have no one except you. Help me, help me, help me.”

When we choose the path of overcoming temptation to rely on brute force, or our own ingenuity alone, in the big things and in the little things in life; in the way we treat people we live with, or work beside, or encounter as strangers; when we choose the path of overcoming the temptations to be unethical, or uncharitable, or unchristian in our words and actions; when we choose the path of overcoming the temptations to be the way everyone else appears to be, or wants us to be, but we have that still, small voice inside saying ‘this is not right, ***this is not right***. When we choose the path that leaves us, afterwards, vulnerable to being taken advantage of, vulnerable to misunderstanding, vulnerable to cynicism and ridicule; then may be we have taken the same path as the one chosen by Jesus when He overcame temptation. More difficulties may lie ahead, but the destination lies with light, and with hope, and with all-embracing love, when we walk alongside the vulnerable One. He says still: “help me, help me, help me.” You then might find that, in reality, He helps you.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Matt Fitzgerald, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 1, p93

ⁱⁱ ibid p95