

Temptation

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

A three-year-old boy was speaking to his mother after church. It was the first Sunday in Lent, and the Sunday School had been learning about temptation. The little boy pulled his mother aside and asked, "Mum, what do you know about the devil?" All sorts of theological and psychological answers formed in the mother's mind but she responded to the three-year-old, "What do *you* know about the devil?" The little boy responded, "Well, the devil talked to Jesus. The devil was mean to Jesus." He leaned forward and dropped his voice to a loud whisper, "If we were in a shop, and you and dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and...there were *sweets*..." He paused for effect. "The devil would say, 'You should take some!'" Astonishing that the three-year-old had grasped some of the main points of temptation and applied it to his own experience of life. His mother went on to ask him, "Darling, if we were at a shop, and dad and I were in one aisle, and you were another aisle, and there were sweets, and the devil said, 'You should take some, what would you say back to the devil?' A genuinely sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied, "Oh! I would say, thank you very much!"

Maybe it is not so surprising that a three-year-old should miss the point of temptation, but lots of us miss the same point all the time. It's easier for us to say, 'Thank you very much' when temptation comes calling. Our reading from Luke is only partly about temptation. It is also about Jesus' choices, and ours, to be obedient to God. Jesus makes the more difficult choices and it marks the beginning and frames the whole of His public ministry. The way of God is the way of making right choices, and obedience to God.

When we relegate the idea, the reality, of temptation to something trivial – like giving up chocolate, or cake, or alcohol, things that aren't for most people – when they're being serious – real sacrifices – soul-saving sacrifices, then it's not a particularly large step before we start relativising the power of temptation when it comes to bigger things.

What do I mean?

In a world where we often take the point of least resistance, when many will give up or give in too easily – then facing up to and dealing with temptation can be dismissed or down-played. When we look at the gospel story of Jesus' temptation, we reflect that few of us know anyone who has fasted for forty days, and fewer have undertaken prolonged fasting ourselves. Not many of us have encountered the devil in so tangible form as to transport us to a distant city, or have thought of throwing ourselves from a great height because the angels would cushion our landing.

If people struggle with the reality and personification of God, how many more will be dismissive about the reality and personification of evil in the form of the devil. Personified or not, the reality of evil in our world today, or sin to give it another name, is palpable. How we handle it, and the temptation to give in to it, or ignore it, or play it down some how, is not simply a matter for the ancient days of the Bible, but for today.

The fact that Jesus' temptation is set in the wilderness is important. It recalls Israel's forty years of wandering until they arrived at last at the Promised Land. In the harsh environment of the wilderness, habits formed by slavery in Egypt were discarded and, sometimes painfully, new ways of trusting in God are formed. For Jesus in His temptation in the wilderness, peripheral things are stripped away, and the key elements of who He was and what He had come to do are laid bare. When all the noise and distraction of everyday life are faded out – what is essential to Him and for Him? Is His trust in Father God complete? Is His resolve to be a humble but strong servant

resolute? Is He prepared to resist temptation, and having made that choice, prepared to face the consequences of resisting temptation?

In Luke's Gospel the devil presents wants as needs, falsehoods as truths, distrust as faith. The devil's second approach is to say that all the kingdoms of the world have been given to him – sounds as if it could be true. That it is false is revealed by the demand for false worship. At stake is who will be trusted and who will be worshipped. Translate into our world – where do we hear lies that sound truthful? In advertising? The media? The world of politics? The pulpit? Where else do we see wants presented as needs? Where are we tempted to think of faith as something God must earn?

How does this slide over into our lives? What are the things that we are tempted to do or to be that are at the beginning of a slippery slope? In tough times are we tempted to keep our heads down and go with the flow rather than face up to hard issues and unpopular choices? A couple of weeks ago my sermon on doing to others as you would have them do to you struck a chord – certainly going round the coffee tables after the service. A recurring question, and this was before the disgraceful spectacle of the Oval Office ambush of President Zelensky a few days ago was, what response should there be to Donald Trump, and his supporters, who habitually lie, misrepresent truth, do not listen? Whose determination to broker peace in Ukraine appears to be predicated on appeasing the Russian aggressor and plundering Ukrainian mineral resources, and until the latter is agreed, withhold crucial military and intelligence resources which devastate Ukraine's ability to defend herself. Is bullying for peace acceptable? Are we tempted to say nothing and hope it might all go away? If we do, who might be next? Set this alongside the casual speculation to turn Gaza into some kind of resort depopulated of native Gazans who are to be sent elsewhere. Hamas are no saints and have blood on their hands, to keep funding and

supplying the state of Israel with military resources to win a peace perpetuates war, and not brokers peace. Which is the opposite of what is being done to Ukraine. Greenland is to be 'acquired', "one way or another", again to be plundered of its resources.

How do you respond to this? Shrug shoulders and say, 'Oh, it's just Donald, he doesn't really mean it?' Walk away because there's no point in doing anything. Give in to the temptation of saying and doing nothing because what is the point?' Or keep on exposing the absurdities, cruelties, ignorance and cynicism, as well as incompetence, of the American executive.

The temptation to give in and to give up because we feel there is nothing we can do is great – but that small capitulation – if repeated by many – permits unacceptable behaviour to go unchallenged. This is not a joke. This is about the freedom of nations; the ethics of business and economy; the lives of people. It is political, and about economics; but it is also moral, and it is part of our Christian living to make up our minds on such things and to speak out when we can and to choose differently by our actions. How we choose to respond, or not respond, how we choose to live our lives, or not to live our lives, ultimately matters. If the temptation is to give in and say nothing, then have we implicitly given approval that this kind of behaviour at international, national and personal level is acceptable? Are we giving permission to those at a local and personal level to behave like this because we don't speak out against those who behave badly on the international and national stage? None of us may find ourselves in the Oval Office, or any other top-level international discussion, in the near future. But we will be with people in our daily lives who might say, 'well if *he*, if *they* can get away with it, why can't *I*?'

If we choose to allow, by intention or default, a world where thoughts, words and actions have no consequences, where will that lead us, and where will that leave us? This gritty gospel passage points us in a direction. Would Jesus exploit His status and power as God's Son to satisfy His own

needs and desires? Would Jesus compromise His relationship with God by denying God's supremacy? Would Jesus accept Satan's bait who misinterpreted the Bible away from God's purpose? Imagine if He had. If Jesus had agreed to any of the devil's offers, he would have become an ancient revolutionary, a skilful politician, a beloved magician; an unusually powerful person. But He would not be the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the servant king.

There are many temptations to be faced. We face the ones that are before us. We take courage and inspiration from Jesus' response to look to a bigger picture, which has selflessness, and kindness, and honesty, and graciousness, and imagination, and tenderness, and faithfulness, and forgiveness, and hopefulness. Our choices define us, personally and internationally. The way we treat others define us, personally and internationally. If we chose this Lenten struggle to be intentional for goodness and for God we will encounter a faithful God Who will walk with us through this present wilderness of despair, and in to the garden of resurrection and hope. And beyond.

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

Amen