

## Temptations

An overweight businessman decided it was time to lose weight. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to the office to avoid his favourite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but he kept on smiling. "This is a special coffee cake," he explained. "I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of goodies. I felt it was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot free right in front of the shop.'" And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"

I have used that story before but have not had to speak on the theme of temptation for a long time. To be honest I was tempted not to do so this morning! We all have different temptations. Things that tempt me, would not, necessarily, tempt you. My list of temptations is long, full of silly and sometimes not so silly things. I expect to be tempted. Sometimes temptation can be extremely serious and dangerous. Sometimes there is the excitement of the thrill of temptation. Some of us make plans for temptations ahead of time. "Son," said his father, "Don't swim in that canal." "OK, Dad," he answered. But he came home that evening carrying a wet pair of swimming shorts "Where have you been?" demanded his Father. "Swimming in the canal," answered the boy. "Didn't I tell you not to swim there?" shouted Dad. "Yes, Dad," replies his boy. "Why did you, then?" he asked. "Well, Dad," he explained, "I had my swim wear with me and I just couldn't resist the temptation." "Why did you take your swimming gear with you?" he questioned. "So I'd be prepared to swim, in case I was tempted," his boy replied! I am reminded of Mark Twain's famous quote: "There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest is cowardice."

Part of our theme today focuses on temptation. We are now in Lent and Lent is a traditional time of giving up temptations. And what an array of temptations there are to give up! Those who have decided to give up are 5 days into their abstinence. Although this is a worthwhile, disciplined strategy, the purpose of Lent, if only seen in this context, is more of a test of our resolve to keep to it. Is Lent merely a six-week challenge (some may say torture) to ensure that we do not give up? Is it merely proof of staying power, of strength of character? 'Yes, at last Lent has come to an end. Now I can have a glass of wine or a chocolate, or a piece of coffee cake.

Something is very wrong, here. Surely Lent should not be seen as an achievement, a time when I have successfully resisted the temptation to have something or do something! That poor office worker with his big coffee cake would have failed! Lent, is not a test; it is not a challenge to our weaker side. Yet, today, Mark's Gospel reading touches on Jesus' TESTS in the desert. Jesus, because he was God's son, knew he was to tread a very dusty and dry path, through temptation and apparent failure. The familiar view is that Jesus' temptations were a drama of events by and through which Jesus developed his priorities and characteristics of his work, devising as it were, the strategy for his future earthly ministry. His temptations can be seen as the foundation of Jesus' ministerial purpose. And his desert experience came immediately after he had had God's resounding acclamation that he was his beloved son, in whom God was well-pleased. Jesus' desert time was a time of concentrated reflection and prayer to consider his future life and calling, all in the sole presence of God. The Gospel writers set the context of a meeting with the Devil – a three-time

encounter in which Jesus is tempted and three times he rejects the suggestions or advances of the Devil. Is it surprising that God uses the Devil? The Devil, or Satan, is not an independent power, equal to God. At any time God could overcome Satan, but he does not. Why? All the writings and commentaries I have read, suggest that it is because temptations have a purpose. And so with Jesus' encounters in the desert.

Temptations undoubtedly expose us to our true selves. We are nowhere near as strong as we think and it is good to recognise our weaknesses, all part of our common humanity, which often has an unattractive side to it. We have this inbuilt capacity to deceive and allow ourselves to be deceived. When we want something badly - like our office worker wanting his cake, we self-deceive ourselves. We are often left with some unpleasant after effects and it turns into a lesson in humility. Yet when we do identify our true self, we tend to grow in humility. William Barclay writes "In this life it is impossible to escape the assault of temptation; but one thing is for sure - temptations are not sent to us to make us fail; they are sent to strengthen the nerve and the sinew of our minds and hearts and souls."

There is another purpose. Jesus' desert experience followed his ringing endorsement from God. In response to Satan's first temptation, Jesus says that we do not live on bread alone, "but need every word that God speaks." Temptation, seen at its most dangerous, can bring someone down to their knees. Jesus was a man, showing human feelings. He realised he couldn't act alone. He had to submit to the will of God.

So it is with us. Bishop Tom Wright, in his Commentary on this passage in Mark, writes: "Yet if we start the journey imagining that God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out on to the street because we haven't quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of temptation. But if we remember the voice that spoke those powerful words of love at Jesus' Baptism we will find the way through." Temptation proves that we are dependent on God.

Paul does not pull any punches. In Romans 13:14 he writes: "...Take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires." Whenever we play with temptation, it is easy to drift into danger. A woman bathing enjoys the comfort of relaxing on an inflated airbed. On realizing she had been swept about a half mile out from the beach, she screams, but no one hears her. A coastguard boat finds her five miles from where she first entered the water. She didn't see the danger until she was beyond her own strength and ability. Giving in to temptation, we go it alone. First it may seem like freedom. But it isn't. To try to resist temptation (I choose my words carefully here) requires God's help. It takes courage and humility to ask for help. In the end it leads to freedom. Crucially, too, we become stronger. By God's grace we experience genuine power, a real power that ultimately is not ours, but God's

Temptation is usually associated with something wrong even evil. Anyone trying to live by the highest standards will be aware of forces aimed at diverting, dissuading, pressurising, forcing them or suggesting compromise, trying to ensure that we settle, if not for something wrong, then something which is less than our best. Jesus experienced those forces. Paul wrote about them. But there is an opposite temptation, one to God's will. Anything beautiful, truthful, good and honest has a powerful attractiveness about it. Books, great music, wonderful art works inspiring people, true

friends, God's creation, worthwhile causes all have a powerful attraction. Paul told us to put ourselves in the way of their temptation. It can be easy to be obsessed, even overwhelmed by temptations which could easily lead to dangerous things. The Bible's message is that good is more powerful than evil and love more than hatred. Jesus' experience in the dust of the desert shows us this. Where sin exists, grace exists much, much more. CS Lewis wrote, in *Surprised by Joy*: "That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed; perhaps. That night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England... But who can duly adore that love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape? The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but properly understood, they plumb the depth of the divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation."

Paul's life shows this too. Behind the final capitulation of Saul to Christ, to become Apostle Paul, was a persistently powerful temptation by God, using people like Stephen and others, tempting Saul, despite his weaknesses, failings and struggles against it. As followers of Jesus and witnesses to the Gospel, we are in the business of temptation, temptation towards something irresistible, wonderful and everlasting.

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