
Temptation in the Wilderness.

When I looked up *temptation* on *Google* this week, I was surprised at how many sites there were, all presenting themselves as slightly risqué and exciting. In his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Oscar Wilde wrote, 'I can resist everything except temptation.' In St Augustine's autobiography *Confessions*, he described a time when he was in the wilderness struggling with temptation. As he did so he prayed, 'Give me chastity and continence, but not just now.' Then again, the film star Mae West said 'I usually avoid temptation unless I can't resist it.'

Although we can relate to all these of course, and laugh along with them, there's a serious side to Lent, and to our struggle with temptation. On Wednesday, we put ashes on our foreheads, as a sign of penitence, and as a reminder of our mortality and humanity, and we set out on a journey that will take us through the wilderness, towards the cross and towards Jesus' betrayal and death. Ahead of us lies the hope and joy of Easter. Lent is the time for reality checks. If there's a problem, what part have I played in it? If a relationship has come unglued, how did I contribute? It's not about guilt or shame or blame; it's about seeing the patterns that need to be set to rights, and doing something about it.

Temptation is an issue all of today's readings focus on. Both Adam and Eve and Jesus face significant temptations, but with very different results, while Paul reflects on the painful, sinful history of human kind, and contrasts it with the story of Christ. We see Adam and Eve's failure to resist temptation and the consequences of their action, and we see Jesus determination to be who he was called to be. Christ makes it possible to become free from the destructive process which Adam set loose in the world.

Matthew's story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is full of vivid images. We can almost feel the heat of the desert or see a strange being with a pointed tail and horns darting around. Here in the wilderness, while he's hungry and weak and alone,

Jesus is tempted to take power and control over his life into his own hands, to become his own god.

It's fatal to try and reduce this passage to a lesson about private morality, that simply says I'll resist the temptation to swear or I'll stop watching X rated videos for Lent. This just trivialises the issue and neglects the more important things. The major focus here is to look at what Jesus did choose: to follow the path that leads to an increase in faith and hope, and to reject the path that diminishes those things. He chose to move towards God, rather than away from God. He refused to gain followers through stunts or miracles. He refused or to take the military option and take power by force, refuses all the things which mean he would trust himself rather than God for his life and his security.

Here in the wilderness, after the drama of his baptism, Jesus takes time out to face who he is and to reflect on his vocation. Ultimately his focus is to do the will of God above everything else. But what does this mean. What is God's will? What is God about? How do we know about these things? What am I about? There are plenty of competing answers to those questions, and we need to spend time unpacking them. Finding the right path calls each of us to some critical, theological reflection, because ultimately the answers depend on who and what we understand God to be, and how we understand ourselves. This is what the Lenten journey is about. As we take time out to reflect and wrestle with those questions, so we begin to find the path to spiritual renewal in our own lives, and a path that increases faith and hope in the world.

The Genesis story takes us right back to the beginning, to find the 'origin' of sin. But this story doesn't really try to tell us about a point in time when sin entered the world, as much as about *how* it enters.

The creation story tells us that in the middle of the magnificent, lush, fertile garden which God has planted and into which he has placed the human creature, there is a tree which God has commanded Adam and Eve not to eat. In contrast to the wilderness, this is a world where their every need is satisfied. As we go on, we encounter a wild creature, the serpent, which is able to speak and reason, and who

questions the woman about God's instructions. As Eve repeats the rules they've been given, the serpent challenges her, suggesting that wisdom is to be gained from eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. We know the rest of the story, and how it all works out in the end. It's not a happy ending.

This story is ultimately about our human tendency to destroy our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. The result of the transgression in the story is alienation in every direction: the woman and the man from each other, the humans from the ground, and the human beings from God.

Of course, the story of Eden isn't without its twists and turns, and in a subtle way, perhaps the writers are trying to say to us that this kind of faithful living in the presence of God isn't easy. It shows us that as we struggle with our relationships with God, with each other, and with creation, and especially as we struggle with who we are as human beings, our perception of God and God's call on our lives isn't necessarily clear or straightforward.

'I'm only human!' This is often our last line of defence when we misplace the car keys, forget a meeting, or read the wrong lesson on a Sunday morning. 'I'm only human!' It's a phrase that reminds everyone of our humanity and vulnerability and how prone we are to mistakes.

In the Gospel story, Jesus proclaims his humanity as well, a humanity that he shares with each of us. He is tempted just like we are. Tempted to use whatever power he has to care for himself when he is hungry. Tempted to test God's love for him. Tempted to seize power over people rather than wait for it to come to him. Tempted to trust in himself, and not in the power that comes by being in relationship with the Father. Tempted to become his own god, like Adam and Eve. But unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus faces his temptations and chooses a different path – towards God, and towards faith and hope.

Perhaps we can't reach the moral perfection Jesus modelled for us, but that doesn't mean we're completely helpless. Time after time we're given opportunities to choose, just as Jesus was. Every time we refuse to use other people to advance our

own cause, every time we forgive actions that seem unforgivable, every time we embrace those who seem unlovable, then we draw a step closer, and as we do, we become part of the process of increasing faith and hope in the world. All God asks of us this Lent, is that we accept the gift of grace and put it to work in our lives to start making this happen in our relationships with each other, and in our relationship with God.

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