

First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11 The Temptations of Jesus

Our gospel reading today is a very clear reminder that we live in a world where conscious moral choices exist. I think this is one of the fundamental differences between us and the people around us today. We assert that not only do we have consumer choice, far more important we have moral choice. And, as soon as we say that, we are asserting that there exists such a thing as evil in the world. The writers of the New Testament and Jesus himself saw this evil in personal terms. There was a devil and there were demons at work in the world. The demons were thought to be particularly dangerous in the wilderness, where on the whole they had it all their own way. So, when Jesus goes into the wilderness, he is not retreating into a private cosy world. No, he is tackling the evil in this world at its very heart.

Of course, there are plenty of people today who have problems with this idea of the devil. Either they find it a piece of nonsense, or they find it an all too oppressive reality. Thirty years ago, I was working with the Royal Airforce in Ramstein. If you have never heard of it, it is the largest American airbase in Europe. I think that anybody who sets foot on an airbase every day of their lives and does not believe in the reality of evil is dangerous. When all is said and done, all the hardware that I used to see twice a week is a testimony to the power of evil. We believe that evil can only be restrained by efficient and massive use of force. The biblical writers were as aware as we are in the twenty-first century that this evil begins in the heart of humankind, and that evil can fall upon individuals or whole groups and overwhelm them. It destroys their power to act rationally or to work for the good of others. However, the New Testament is very clearly aware that evil is not a power to be feared, for it was defeated on the cross. Yet it is a power to be reckoned with. We must face up to the fact that evil crouches at the door of our hearts waiting for an opportunity to distract us from obedience to God. Evil is a choice we can make. The temptation of Jesus shows us three of the ways in which Satan sought to distract Jesus and ways he still employs today.

The *first temptation* is to turn the stones into bread. This was quite simply a temptation to Jesus to use his powers selfishly for his own use. Jesus sees this as disobedience to his Father's will. In other words, he is to do what God says. And what God wills for Jesus is: not to do miracles for his own satisfaction or to be self-serving, he is there to serve others. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Jesus the man for others. And Bonhoeffer was a man for others. At a time when most people in Germany were busy trying to save their own skin, going along with evil, actively participating in it or at best turning a blind eye to it, he consciously chose to stand against it. The result was - like Jesus - to be put to death. He had followed Jesus, he had thought of others rather than himself. Let us not kid ourselves. There is a cost in serving others. To reach out in love to all those who are hurting and lost and those who are stupidly mesmerised by the trinkets of this passing world. We are called to concentrate on others. That sounds a bit grim, but I think we have all been around long enough to know that it is the way to lasting joy.

The *second temptation* is that Jesus will throw himself off the temple pinnacle. Rabbinic sources say "Our teachers taught us that when the King, the Messiah, is revealed he will come and stand on the roof of the Temple." Once again Satan assumes that Jesus is God's Son and he hopes that he will see his Sonship as the power to perform miracles. This time the temptation is not to serve himself, but others. Here the devil is clever. He cites scripture and apparently calls on Jesus to trust in God. He practically turns religious. Is this not, after all, demanding that Jesus take the Bible seriously and discover its direct application to his daily life? But really no. The reliance on scripture is not to be to the glory of God, but rather to the glory of Jesus, the man who is to demonstrate his great faith. I came across a great quote on this from a Swiss theologian called Eduard Schweitzer. "What the venture of faith really is, and what it is not - that must be examined in each case. God's 'no' to a prayer can be just as much an experience of God as a miraculous 'yes'. But the devil is after a miracle, so that humans can become Lord of God and compel him to act through the power of their faith. But that, of course, would destroy faith and substitute blackmail."

Have you ever been to those churches where they say, "Yes Lord, today we are going to see miracles! Yes Lord, you are going to come in power, in the power of your spirit and people are going to be healed!" You know, I may be wrong, but that sounds like blackmail. As another commentator put it, the devil suggested it would be folly for Jesus to enter into his ministry with the prospect of possible failure. As Christians and as churches, people are hungry for success and for revival. No wonder. In Germany we are nose-diving. Most people that you and I know don't give a damn about God. But in the face of this, we are called to be obedient Christians. The way of discipleship is the way of the cross. Don't be surprised that the Christian's life is difficult and lacking in success. The gospels are not slick books that tell you how to lead a successful life, where everything in your garden blooms. We are not promised success, but a struggle against the principalities and powers. Evil is no push-over. There are no spectacular shortcuts, just obedience.

The *third temptation* for Jesus is to fall down and worship the devil and thereby gain the kingdom of the world. Jesus tells him to go away and makes it clear that the heart of the Christian faith is to worship the Lord our God and him only.

The temptations we all face day by day, and at critical moments of decision and vocation in our lives, may be very different from those of Jesus, but they make exactly the same point. They are trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us to turn aside from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us. God has a costly but glorious vocation for each of us. The enemy will do everything possible and thwart God's purpose. If we have heard God's voice welcoming us as his children, we will also hear the whispered suggestions of the enemy.

But, as God's children, we are entitled to use the same defence as the Son of God himself. Store scripture in your heart and know how to use it. Keep your eyes on God and trust him for everything. Remember your calling, bring God's light into the world. And say a firm 'no' to the voices that lure you back into darkness.