

## March 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 Temptation

**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Our Gospel reading records the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the desert. Temptation is something that is part of our everyday lives, and invariably we are not actually conscious that we are experiencing temptation. So what is temptation? A definition I like is 'a desire to engage in short-term urges for enjoyment, that threatens long-term goals. In the context of some religions, temptation is the inclination to sin.' There are, of course, degrees of temptation. On the one hand, one could be tempted to do something which really hurts someone or even breaks the law, while on the other hand it could be something not nearly so dire such as eating cake when on a diet.

Whatever the degree, temptation is something none of us are immune from. There is the story of the little boy who was sitting on a fence looking up at the bright red apples that were hanging from a branch on a laden tree. Suddenly around the corner came the owner of the tree and he shouted at the boy, 'Are you trying to steal my apples?' 'No, sir', replied the boy, 'I am trying not to.'

Then there is that wonderful quote from Oscar Wilde, 'I can resist anything except temptation.'

If we refer to our Genesis reading, that well-known account of Adam and Eve, who of course represent us, being tempted by the snake, and then disobeying God. Then there are the consequences. There is so much meaning in this succinct story.

Firstly, let us be clear that the snake represents Satan or the Devil. This is affirmed for us in Revelation 12:9. '*This great dragon, the ancient serpent called the Devil or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world.*' We are all, every one of us, continually assailed by thoughts of wanting to do or say things that are contrary to what God would want us to do or say. This spirit that whispers in our ear, so to speak, we call the Devil. The Devil is simply a spirit that works in conflict with God. This conflict can involve something quite dramatic or extreme, or it can be something not so dramatic, such as putting someone down, gossiping, or not being entirely truthful about something.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God when they ate from the apple tree, the tree of knowledge of what is good and what is wrong. They then suffered the consequences. That is a very important message for us. There will always be consequences. In the end disobedience to God leads to unhappiness; things tend to fall apart in our lives. I made this point in a sermon a few weeks ago. If we insist on leading a life that is not in sync with God, we end up in trouble. Jesus makes this point in John 15:6. *Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers.*

This is where repentance and God's grace come into play. By acknowledging that we have gone wrong we are open to receive God's grace. *'God does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent.'* 2 Peter 3:9. Then we are in a position to turn over a new leaf, to make a fresh start. This lies very much at the heart of our Lenten journey, our Lenten theme.

If we focus for a minute on our Gospel reading recording the temptation of Jesus in the desert, there is an important point to note. The word *tempt* in English has a very negative connotation. It conveys the sense of enticing someone into sin. However, the Greek word used here is *peirazein*, which means 'to test' rather than 'to entice into sin.' So Jesus was being tested. Remember this all took place immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan River and just before he was due to commence his ministry. So this testing was a preparation for his ministry. In a sense, he was being steeled for the massive challenge lying ahead of him.

In a similar way, we can look upon any temptation we experience as a kind of test. Are we up to the challenge of being a follower of Christ? We all know how difficult that can be.

There is the story of a young man, John Blanchard, who struck up a relationship with a woman, purely through letters. He had found her notes handwritten in a book he had come across in a library and was very moved by what she had written. Because she had written her name, Hollis Maynell, he was able to track her down and found she lived in New York. He wrote and introduced himself and so began a very meaningful relationship based purely on their letters.

Blanchard requested a photo but she refused. She felt that if he really cared, it wouldn't matter what she looked like. Blanchard lived a long way from New York but finally decided it was time to meet this woman, because he had developed very strong feelings for her. So they scheduled their first meeting – 6.00pm at the Grand Central Station in New York.

She wrote, 'You will recognise me by the red rose I will be wearing on my lapel.' At 6.00pm he was in the station looking for a girl whose heart he loved, but whose face he had never seen. Let me tell you what happened in John Blanchard's words.

*A young woman was coming towards me, her figure long and slim. Her blonde hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were blue as flowers. Her lips and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive. I started towards her, entirely forgetting to notice that she wasn't wearing a rose. As I moved toward her, she smiled. 'Going my way?' she murmured.*

*Almost uncontrollably I made my way towards her, and then I saw Hollis Maynell. She was standing almost directly behind the young woman. A woman well past 40, she had greying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was a plain-looking woman and quite frumpy, and she*

*had a red rose pinned to her lapel. The young woman in the green suit was walking quickly away.*

*I felt as though I was split in two, so keen was I to follow her, and yet I was longing to meet the woman whose spirit I had connected with so very strongly. And there she stood. Her pale, plump face was so gentle and sensible, her grey eyes had a warm twinkle. I did not hesitate. My fingers gripped the small worn blue leather copy of the book that was to identify me to her.*

*This would not be love but it would be something precious, a friendship for which I had been and must ever be most grateful for. I squared my shoulders and held out the book to the woman, even though while I spoke there was a distinct feeling of disappointment.*

*'I'm John Blanchard. You must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad to meet you. May I take you to dinner?'*

*The woman's face broke into a tolerant smile. 'I don't know what this is about, son,' she answered, 'but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should tell you that she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of test!'*

Not only are there consequences for giving into temptation, there are also consequences for resisting temptation. The difference is that they are good consequences.

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