

## Sermon for First Sunday in Lent, 1 March, 2020 – Year A

*'Temptation'* (Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4: 1-11).

"I can resist everything except temptation." So said Oscar Wilde, in one of his well-known witticisms. It's an amusing quip, and memorable. Unfortunately, it completely misses the point. Temptation plays a vital part in God's unfolding plan, because it can act to strengthen our willpower on the spiritual path. Looked at in this way, temptation is a great gift. BUT it only has this 'gift' quality, if we try hard to resist it.

That, of course, is the point of today's Gospel. In testing Jesus, the Devil plays a vital part in God's plan. Had Jesus **not** resisted the temptations of the flesh, worldly power and spiritual pride, he might still have been a brilliant spiritual teacher, but he would not have been the Saviour of the world. The one who was worthy to take the suffering servant's road to the cross had to be able to resist all the Devil's wiles, subtle traps and stratagems. Great temptations would abound - on Palm Sunday, in the Garden of Gethsemane and on Good Friday - and Jesus would need unimaginable strength to resist them. There was no way he would have been up to the challenge, had he fallen at the first hurdles, in the wilderness.

Recalling Jesus's amazing spiritual strength, each Lent we're given the opportunity to strengthen our own inner life. Sometimes it can be helpful to give things up. The cup of good cheer, for example, which brings momentary well-being, but dampens down mental clarity and hastens sleep. This is no good at all, if one has set aside a time for meaningful reading, prayer and reflection in the evening. Instead of this, we find ourselves waking up in our armchair, after an agreeable visit to the land of nod! Or perhaps one tends to enjoy too much the pleasures of the table? These often result in sluggishness and lethargy, as the evenings wear on. In this case, cutting down on portion size might be helpful. Even that old favourite, giving up chocolate, can be beneficial, if it helps us to flex those spiritual muscles.

Maybe we're of the 'no pain, no gain' school, and believe that things don't do us any good unless they're a bit unpleasant, like a dose of bitter medicine? But that's not really the point of Lent. It's not intended so much as an endurance test, but as an opportunity to focus on higher and better things.

The Gospel today makes it clear that the Devil's tests came right at the end Jesus's 40 days and nights in the wilderness. No one knows exactly what Jesus did before the Devil came on the scene, but it's a pretty safe bet that he took advantage of the solitude, peace, quiet and freedom from disturbance afforded by the desert, in order to do a lot of thinking and praying. This time was vital for him, if he was to find the strength to fulfil his saving mission.

Likewise, for all of us, the 40 days and 40 nights of Lent are a golden opportunity. For us, also, the stakes are high. We can assess the extent to which we've genuinely opened our hearts and minds to Christ's saving power. Perhaps, also, we can carry out a spiritual audit on our true priorities. If we're really honest with ourselves, who or

what truly comes first for us: Christ or Mammon? How is our spiritual commitment reflected in the way we use our money, time and talents? How much time are we prepared to give to prayer, meditation and spiritual reading? Does our inner commentary tend to be kind and loving, or critical and judgmental? If the latter, what effect is this having on our peace of mind and quality of life?

There are many more questions we might wish to address, and probably this will be different for each of us. But however we choose to make use of it, Lent is a time to ask such questions - to take stock and decide on truly meaningful priorities. Unless we assert our will power, the hours, days, weeks and months slip away uncharted, and with little to show as the fruits of our spiritual labour. One of the Devil's greatest temptations and tricks is complacency; the thought that there will always be time later for the serious questions. The fact is, none of us knows what tomorrow may hold, and so now is always the acceptable time! May this Lenten Season be meaningful and fruitful for us all.

Amen.

Revd Ian Welch

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