

# Matthew 1:4-11: Temptation

*Lent 1, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023*

Chocolate. Not getting up from a nice warm bed. Sex. Chips.

Temptations. We all know temptation. We have been looking after our daughter's dog, Freddie, over the weekend, and even he knows temptation. He went into Alina's room last week and ate a special doughnut. When we came into the house, we knew from his behaviour he had been up to something. He knew he had given in to temptation.

The ones I have just mentioned are, in some ways, the trivial ones. They are about bodily needs, lusts. That does not mean they are any easier to resist. Though it is interesting that for some people, some things in that list are not a temptation at all. There are even people in the church who do not like chocolate.

Advertising has reduced temptation to something you should give into. 'Naught but nice.' 'Go on, spoil yourself.' 'Because you're worth it.' Consumerism is the antithesis of self-discipline.

How about these. Being charged too little in a shop or restaurant. Finding something in the office that you would like at home. Wanting to go shopping because you feel a bit down. Finding some secret information about someone you know.

Temptation is not a feel-good topic for a sermon. We talk a lot about how God is loving, encouraging, supportive. And rightly so. I doubt many of us came to God because we fancied being told off. There is an image of God, quite commonly held, that God sits in heaven watching you, and telling you not to do anything you enjoy. Yet the amazing truth about God is that he is generous, forgiving, the source of joy and love.

God's discipline is not so pleasant. But love does not just mean always giving someone what they want. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' it says in Proverbs (12v24) – though 'the rod' might not be so favoured now. Children, and people, do need guidance. We know that we can find temptation hard.

Jesus was tempted. Our reading in Matthew comes immediately after Jesus' baptism by John. It is just before Jesus begins his ministry, and seems like a preparation for this.

Jesus went into the wilderness – 'led by the Spirit', it says, and fasted. He was at a very weak point. 'Forty days' is a general term for 'a long time' in the Bible, though in the case of fasting, forty days is about the limit for how long you can go without food safely. 'He was famished', it says. He would have been at the end of his physical strength.

What is the point of fasting? I must admit it is something I find hard to understand. When I try it, I just end up concentrating on feeling hungry. But since Jesus did it, I am forced to think that there must be something to it. Perhaps it is the discipline, confirming to yourself that you do have the resolve to overcome your desires. Or it gives you extra time, undistracted from providing for yourself, in order to pray.

Presumably, Jesus told the disciples about his temptations, since no-one else was there. The devil, who is called here the 'tempter', comes at the point of weakness. Which happens to us to. When you are tired, run down, stressed, ill, it is harder to resist. Which is why we need support, community, friends at some times. The tempter tried three different tacks.

Make some bread from these stones. This was Jesus' immediate need: hunger. Give in to your bodily needs: hunger, sex, alcohol, drugs inertia. This is where we started this talk. Jesus responds here as he

does to all the temptations, by quoting the Bible, all from stories about Israel's time in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, which must have felt relevant to Jesus at the time: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8v3). The hunger is not the most important thing. Misusing his position would be wrong.

Next time, the tempter tries quoting scripture himself: 'He will command his angels concerning you' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone' (Psalm 91v11-12). Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple, so that God will rescue you, and prove you are the chosen one. Note the 'If you are the Son of God'; doubt works its way into us. Seek fame, popularity, recognition. Do something spectacular. This must have been a constant temptation to Jesus during his ministry, as you healed to help people, used miracles to point to God. But the temptation is: boost your ego a bit, go for self-fulfilment. His response is 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' (Deuteronomy 6:16). Again, where is your focus? It should be on God.

Then the devil presents Jesus with a vision of what he could do, who he could be. Not the way of weakness, of obedience, of being a servant. Just cut through it. Take control. Make certain that what you want happens. Use your power. Become the ruler of the earth by force. Seek power, glory, control over others, taking whatever you want. This is probably the worst level of temptation (if there can be such thing), as these are the temptations that lead to wars, oppression, injustice. Jesus responds: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' (Deuteronomy 6v13). We should not be seeking glory for ourselves. Jesus modelled not taking power, but submission, doing what was needed, what was right.

Then the devil left him, and God did 'command his angels concerning' him, however that may have happened. It was not the way of power, but the way of obedience that proved right. It says in the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus was tempted, but without sin' (4v15). While we often fail, Jesus did not. I think this is an oft-overlooked aspect of his greatness, but impressive none the less.

In contrast, our reading from Genesis showed Adam and Eve's temptation. Adam and Eve, representing all of us, were tempted, and they fell. Interesting how the serpent misrepresents the choice. "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden", making God's command sound worse than it was. And God had said that they would die if they ate the fruit, which they did not, literally, but the life where they lived in harmony with each other, and creation, and their creator, was over.

What do we do with Temptation? This is the first Sunday in Lent, which is the season of penitence. It is a time when we recognise that we do fall. But we know that, just as a parent does not reject their child if they misbehave, God loves us anyway, and that he will help us follow more closely. There is a great verse in 1 Corinthians: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (10v13). A promise that we are not on our own in temptation. That help is there through God, through others, if we will receive it. Ultimately resisting temptation is good for you. Because you are worth more than that.

Jeremy Thake  
St. John & St. Stephen.

## **Matthew 1**

### **The Temptation of Jesus**

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' 4 But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",  
and "On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

7 Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; 9 and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' 10 Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him."

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## **Genesis 2-3**

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

### **The First Sin and Its Punishment**

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' 2 The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.