

Lent 1 RCL

St Laurence, Ludlow 2014

Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted and yet undefiled

Temptation is one of the great themes of Lent, it is the subject of the gospel for this Sunday, the first in Lent: and of the great Lenten hymn I take as my text this morning. But it isn't the best known quotation about temptation in the English language: that must belong to Oscar Wilde: 'I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation.' To Oscar I shall return. But for the moment let's go back to the story of Jesus in the wilderness. First the Devil tempts him to turn the stones of the desert into bread. Then he places Jesus on a pinnacle of the Temple and tempts him to throw himself off – with a miracle to save him. Lastly Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world – all will be his if he will worship Satan.

The three temptations are of different kinds and in increasing order of subtlety. Physical need; authority over the world; spiritual influence.

The Christian Church has always wanted to classify the seriousness of different sins. Sometimes rather too much so. Browning caricatures this in the terrifying lines of a gloating priest-confessor:

There's a great text in Galatians
Once you trip on it, entails
Twenty-nine distinct damnations
One sure, if another fails

But we see from today's Gospel that in spite of the dangers the principle of judging the spiritual weight of temptation is as old as the Gospel.

We need to be reminded that Christians must look at the spiritual seriousness of sin with a view to what our attitudes and actions do to our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. That's the criteria for the seriousness of sin: what an action or attitudes does to our relationship with God and our fellow human beings.

It is interesting that sexual temptation does not even find a place in today's Gospel. And that where Our Lord does deal with it, as in the woman taken in adultery or the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, his overwhelming attitude is one of loving acceptance and forgiveness in contrast to the censoriousness of the community. "He who is without sin shall cast the first stone . . . Has no-one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you: go: and sin no more."

Spiritual temptation is more insidious and much less visible. The sin of pride was traditionally thought of as the most serious of the seven deadly sins. T. S. Eliot gets it right when Archbishop Thomas Beckett in *Murder in the Cathedral* is *almost* caught out by the final tempter, who dangles the glory of martyrdom before him, the final tempter is not a wayward knight but the devil:

The last temptation is the greater treason
To do the right thing for the wrong reason

And notice the similarity with the second temptation in today's Gospel.

Notice that we have moved beyond particular actions to inner motives. Ultimately we are judged by our purity of heart. I came across this quotation some time ago: it's from Mary Gordon's novel *Final Payments*. It is set in the Roman Catholic Ireland and confessional:

"Can you tell me your mortal sins since your last confession?"

"I have had sexual intercourse with three men. Two of whom are married."

"Go on."

"I think these are the only mortal sins I have committed." Except, I thought, the one I cannot tell, the one you are not interested in: that I put myself at the centre of the universe.

This has a rather precise catholic setting but it has wider applications. Many years ago when I was a theological student a group of us went to see a splendidly irreverent film called *Bedazzled*, directed by Dudley Moore. It was a Cambridge Footlights style morality play on the seven deadly sins. Raquel Welch put in a guest appearance as – guess what – Lust. In the final scene the devil, in a business suit, is sitting cross-legged on a suburban pillar-box with a riding crop in hand forcing his lieutenants to dance in a circle around him singing, Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus. The devil "putting himself at the centre of the universe" and so sometimes do we.

Lent is a time for looking at our spiritual motives, as well as or even rather than, our particular sins. It is a time for correcting a great deal of dangerous confused thinking about sin, both inside and outside the Church.

There are two particular insidious confusions. Our Oscar quote summarizes a good deal of contemporary determinism perfectly: 'I couldn't help it: I can resist everything except temptation.' There are indeed plenty of people who think that all desires are always legitimate and that self-fulfilment must have priority over all else if we are to grow into human maturity.

The other mistaken view, found outside as well as inside the Church, can be expressed by another Robert Browning quotation:

Why comes temptation, but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his foot
And so be pedestalled in triumph.

Here is the . . .denying ascetic view of the world, the world as a vale of tears for the steeling of the soul. Temptation is offered so that we may learn to be good soldiers in a spiritual warfare.

But neither of these contrasting views gets further than our particular actions. They don't get to the heart of the matter – our motive. Worse, they are both flawed because they are *both essentially self-centred*. The one starts with self at all costs ignoring the spiritual, anthropological and educational fact that there cannot be a true self without self-sacrificial relationships. The second has the equally selfish goal of personal victory, the soul 'pedestalled in triumph' is called theologically: Justification by works. The one may lead to the systematic exploration of all carnal and mental pleasures. The other may lead to their complete negation. But both, being self-centred may lead to damnation. Stones into bread; or human power and the spiritual temptation of the pinnacle of the Temple all lead to the same self-destruction.

I believe that the choices we have to make each day, and the decisions we make without conscious choice, all give to human beings the opportunity to look at inner motive, as Elliott's Beckett, as the penitent in Mary Gordon's novel.

We pray “lead us not into temptation”. But there is no escaping choices and decisions. The Tempter himself returned to Our Lord at an opportune time. Lead us not into temptation must involve the prayer that we see things as they really are. That we act in accordance with our best motives. When we see things as they are we shall have a proper sense of self-esteem. But we shall not want to put ourselves at the centre of a self-gratifying universe. For that is why the devil fell. He prefers to be at the centre of a suburban pillar-box called the world, rather than be off-centre in the real Sanctus in heaven. There will be times when we recognise that the real temptation is to put ourselves centre-stage. This is the archetypal sin: we make ourselves Gods like Adam and Eve in the garden who ate the forbidden fruit.

And the only way to avoid this eternally destructive self-centredness is to look at Jesus. Throughout the Lenten period we look at the self-emptying of Christ, culminating on the Cross. Only by keeping Christ in view can we begin to see the beauty and the power of the God who in the incarnation moved off centre stage, off stage altogether, down to the pit of death. Then we see the glory of the Cross: of not being at the centre of ones own petty universe. Then we see the only way to create community and communion and the true fulfilment of self - in the other who is God and our neighbour.

Keep, O keep us, Saviour dear
Ever constant by Thy side,
That with Thee we may appear
At the eternal Eastertide.