
Sermon on Matthew 4.1-11

St Nicholas Cuddington, 10 am Sunday 22 January 2017

PRAYER.

The Temptation of Jesus. Does anybody today have much of an idea about temptation? What do you think it means? Since we live in an internet culture I decided to consult the great Silicon Valley oracle for guidance. Let me run past you a handful of explanations I came up with online in a few minutes of random surfing.

Temptation is a type of vegan ice cream. It's a Canadian chocolate and nut patisserie. It used to be a brand of Cadbury's chocolates but that's now only sold in India. It's a small fashion boutique in Ely (Cambridgeshire), an online gift retailer and chain of gift shops in the home counties, a type of bathtub and also a very fancy showerhead. It's an aperitif, a fragrance as well as an aftershave spray. It's a resort in Cancun, Mexico and a fine restaurant on the Caribbean island of St Martin. It's the name of countless nightclubs, bars, dance venues, TV shows, underwear shops and cheap romantic novels. It's also a type of rose and a type of fuchsia. And a brand of car polish.

And – oh yes, some people seem to think it has something to do with an amusing tale about Adam and Eve and an apple and a chatty snake. Or maybe with a story about St Antony in a desert cave and a vision of exciting wild monsters.

Well, I think we get the idea. Temptation is a delicious way of enhancing the thrill of our chase for pleasure.

So why should anyone in their right mind pray, "lead us not into temptation"? Ours is a post-Christian society that smells and fears insensitivity far more than it smells or fears evil, and which finds Christian morality no longer just irrelevant but positively offensive. Shouldn't we should just rewrite the whole thing? "We affirm and celebrate the rich diversity of temptation; deliver us from attempts to resist it, because they are moralizing and exclusive." To rephrase things like that would certainly spare us the open knives of Christianity's cultured despisers.

In fact, even for Christians it seems tricky and difficult to know what it means to pray about temptation – particularly when we too often feel pretty clueless as to what it might be. Is it something to do with food and dieting? With binge shopping or binge holidays? Or with sex? Or ambition for success? The ancient Christian author St Augustine captures something of this difficulty even for those who might seem morally serious, when he admits that he used to pray that God would give him sexual chastity – "just not yet!"

To begin to think about this I'd like us to consider two simple but radical observations. Note, first of all, that in the Lord's Prayer the talk of temptation or trial doesn't

stand by itself but it's paired with another statement that helps to explain it: 'Lead us not into temptation, *but instead* deliver us from Evil' – or more accurately, from the Evil One.

So in the Bible, the idea of temptation is closely linked to Evil and destruction. This may well strike us as a little over the top. But it certainly blows out of the water any easy idea that temptation in the proper sense is just a bit of harmless fun. It also quickly eliminates most of the items in that Google catalogue of temptations I offered you at the beginning.

So it seems that escape from temptation is in fact closely tied in with being rescued from evil. But if that is true, then it's important to note a second striking observation. What tempts us is always just a smoke-screen: the presenting object of desire is always a cover for something much more sinister. "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One."

That's a rather sobering thought: properly understood rather than trivialized, temptation is a dangerous encounter with a destructive force that takes on a kind of personified intensity.

And no, this isn't something out of *Harry Potter*. It's about our story from Matthew Chapter 4 that was read to us earlier.

The Temptation of Jesus is a pretty gripping story – although I hate to disappoint you: it's surprisingly low on sex, drugs or fast cars. But it does tell us a great deal about how temptation and evil are related – and also about lousy and successful ways to deal with them.

Temptation may be subtle and nuanced or it may be intense and passionate. But it's never just a harmless exercise of delicious reflection on a piece of cream pie: "Will I or won't I? Is the upside better than the downside?" No, it's more properly a deadly clash of swords with the Evil One. It's about the bracing challenge of a choice between God's way or another way – like my way.

Jesus, we read, is led into the wilderness – interestingly not by the devil but by the Spirit. To find ourselves in the wilderness is not itself the work of the devil. But after fasting and loneliness for 40 days, the tempter comes to Jesus to rock the very foundations of his trust in God. That is the real aim of temptation: not getting you to taste forbidden fruit, but getting you to deny the love of God. It's a trial that probes and tests the deepest fibre of our being.

How does the devil go about this? This is really fascinating. He basically follows exactly the line he took with Adam and Eve – except that where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus succeeds. Let's have a look at how it works.

First, a quick recap to remind us of the temptation of Adam and Eve. Step One is to get someone alone. And to tell them they're missing out on the meaning of life: never mind what God or trusted friends are saying, but rely on your own individual interpretation. The serpent speaks to Eve, not Eve and Adam, and certainly not to their fellowship with the Lord God himself who walks in the garden.

Step Two is to diminish and eliminate the word of God. The tempter caricatures what God said: 'Did God *really* say, "You shall not eat from *any* tree in the garden"?' Of course he didn't! But Eve rises to the bait, and figures that well, hmm! Maybe God's instruction really is a bit unreasonable and unrealistic. And the serpent encourages this sense that what's on the page cannot possibly be what is meant: 'Surely you won't die. God himself knows ... that

your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God!’ On this line of reasoning, what’s wrong is not what pushes aside the word of God, but only what feels less comfortable than it might be.

Step Three is simply to move in for the kill. By eliminating God’s command, the tempter reduces us to a gibbering moral and rational wreck. He leaves us driven by disordered affections, like leaves in the wind – a lust for material possession, for aesthetic beauty, and for knowledge as power. ‘Seeing that the tree was *good for food*, and a *delight to the eyes*, and desirable to *make one wise*, she took of the fruit and ate.’ Adam is happy enough to follow the peer pressure – if even my friend does it, it must be OK.

Contrast all this with Jesus when the tempter comes to him. Once again, Step One: get him alone. Step Two: eliminate the plain sense of what God says, supposedly in the name of being reasonable and objective. ‘If you really *are* the Son of God....’ Surely then you can be and do whatever pleases you!

What’s interesting here is not of course the devil. No, what the devil does is always thoroughly unoriginal and boringly predictable! What’s interesting is that unlike his foremother in the garden, this Son of Eve does *not* rise to the bait. Jesus does *not* chime in with the tempter and produce the invited distortion of what God has ‘*really*’ said. Instead, he finds in the Word of God the only true account of God’s life-giving presence: Jesus replies that however powerful and absolute our affections may seem, it is only God himself who provides truly satisfying nourishment: ‘man ... shall live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’.

After failing on that score, the tempter decides to have one more go and raises the stakes. This time it’s to flatter the human desire to know God and be like God. First, an attempt to hijack Jesus’ own appeal to Scripture. OK, he says, since you must quote Scripture at me: if you really are God’s favourite, then jump off this cliff, because surely the Bible itself promises you the power to do so. But Jesus sees right through this twisting of Scripture to slander its author: “Again it is written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Once that fails, the Evil One quietly drops the appeal to Scripture because he knows he can’t win that game. Instead, he pulls out all the stops and appeals, as in Genesis, to our naked desire for power, beauty and possession: “all the kingdoms of this world and their splendour” I will give you. But just at the moment when the devil pretends to speak as God, to make *himself* divine, Jesus dismisses him by returning to the simplicity of Scripture’s most basic affirmation: “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him *only*.’”

The great encouragement of this story is that it allows us to pray the prayer of Jesus as our own – because he has gone before us. “Lead us not into Temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One”: by the very act of praying that prayer with Jesus and with the church, we have already been given the upper hand in our conversation with the Enemy. Let’s grasp that promise by following his encouragement and making his prayer our own.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

AMEN