

Lent 1, 2024

Mk.1:9-15

The Temptation of Christ

Temptation...

And he was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.

What do you think temptation is?

Well, step back for a moment and ask a bigger question. Why are we here? I don't mean here in church, I mean here at all. Here as in existing. What are we *for*?

Well, there's a school of thought of course that says nothing. We're here by chance, meant by no-one, for no-thing. That's where atheism takes you. You're just a fluke.

We can debate that another time, but just for today take the Christian answer as read. Christianity says you're here for something alright. You're here to be the image of God – by which we mean, you're here to be a perfect sign, in your little bit of flesh and blood, of the wisdom and goodness and beauty of the reality behind all reality. You were made by God to be his perfect self-expression, his masterpiece.

That's quite something, isn't it. That's more than being successful, or rich, or clever, more even than being good. You're here to be glory. To be a perfect burst of love. As Jesus put it, love with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. The image of God.

That's what you're made for.

And temptation is whatever distracts you from that. Whatever makes you forget it, and act as if you're really about something else. It might be success, it might be sex, it might be power, it might be money. It is whatever it is, that is not God, that you make the point of your life. Incidentally, it is probably not chocolate. The devil will be quite happy if you fiercely resist the desire for chocolate this Lent, whilst He wins all the bigger points. If he's got you worshipping beauty, or fitness, or success or popularity, then however disciplined you are when it comes to chocolate, it is game, set and match to him anyway.

At which point you might say, really? The Devil? In 2024? Are we really meant to believe in a devil?

Well, not in a little red man with horns and hooves, of course. I'm not sure any Christian *ever* really believed in that. Never assume that your ancestors were stupid.

But in a power bigger than us which wants us to fail, which wants to distract us from our call, which wants to corrupt us, which wants us to end in misery? A power infinitely more wily, resourceful, and focussed than us, bent on our destruction? Well, yes. We really *are* meant to believe in that, even in 2024. If Scripture is any way our guide in life, well, that's what it teaches. And actually, looking around the world, and looking at our own lives, it's not really that hard to believe.

Although what is harder to believe, and is also what Scripture teaches, is that this Devil is a defeated power. The devil is a defeated power.

That's what this forty days is all about, remember? That's what Lent is. It is not *primarily* a time for discipline and effort and trying hard, for resisting temptation and the Devil with all our might. That kind of struggle has its place, of course it does. But it is always a very secondary place. A very subordinate place. The first thing about Lent is that we're drawing near to Good Friday and Easter. Drawing near, that is, to the time of the great battle fought over us, fought for us, fought in us – but not, let me underscore again, *not* by us. We draw near to what Jesus did on the Cross and in the Resurrection. We draw near to the deeds that smashed the devil's power. That broke him, forever, and which take us from him.

What was that deed? Well, it was a life lived all the way to death, all the way through death, lived all the way down, in heart, soul, mind and strength, lived entire and whole and perfect, lived the way it was meant to be. It was a life that was the perfect image of God, that refused to be distracted, that despite all the Devil threw at it, stayed true to its vocation. (A Second Adam to the fight, and to the rescue came). It was the life of Jesus Christ, made perfect in his death, the life of utter righteousness, the perfect expression of God.

And on the Cross, that life was opened up – literally, broken open, ripped apart – so that we could go inside it. So that we, with all our distraction, all our failure, all our wrong direction and confusion and guilt, could be taken into that life, and set straight. Made right again, made true. So that his righteousness could become our righteousness. So that, in a way, it would no longer be us that live – at least, not the screwed up, distorted guilty us – but Christ that lived in us. That’s what happens at every Eucharist. That’s what Good Friday and Easter mean. And drawing close to that is what Lent is really about.

Temptation is everything that threatens to wreck you, to steal you away from what you’re meant to be. You have to identify what form your’s takes – it will be different for each of us. And you need to pray about it, and resist it, and do so again and again. But ultimately, here’s the Good News. The Gospel is not try harder, be better, and you’ll make it some day. The Gospel is that Jesus Christ died and rose for you, and that he wants to pour his life into you now. Not because you deserve it, not because you’ve tried really hard, but simply because He made you and He loves you and He wants you back. It is as simple and as wonderful as that. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.