

LENTEN STUDIES 2 2013 Temptations

Lent is making a fresh start, to try again more earnestly with sincerity and honesty to live up to the challenge of our Christian lives; conscientiousness at work, dependability in our assurances, truthfulness in our assertions, humility in our judgements, purity in our lifestyle and generosity in our giving. Lent is taking back the pieces of our lives that we have given to authorities other than God. Lent is putting our world back together into a proper relationship with God. Lent is blowing hard on dead embers, shaking awake sleepy promises, taking on again the imitation of Christ with renewed commitment and vigour. Lent is closing the distance between Jesus and us. We have pushed him into the background and he calls, "Come to me all who labour and are heavy-burdened and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28) "Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood, and you would not." (Matt. 23: 37-38.) Lent is not so much a time *to go OFF* things, as a time *to get back ON* the things we have gone off, such as prayer and the sacraments. Lent is a pruning time, to get rid of unproductive suckers, which drink up our energy but diminish our spiritual fruitfulness. The aim of the Lenten surgery is not to inflict pain but to help our tree produce better fruit. Christ is the true vine. At Lent's end, may we be the nearest thing to Jesus that we can possibly be.

In English, **temptations** are *to entice to do wrong, to take the wrong way*. In the Bible, they are a *TEST*. Abraham was tested to sacrifice his only son (Genesis 22:1). God is *GOOD* and cannot do evil; God cannot make anyone do wrong; God cannot be the agent to make someone a sinner. We are *tested* not to weaken us but to make us stronger, finer, purer from the ordeal, the better then to be used by Jesus.

Jesus had just had a tremendous 'high' at his baptism in the Jordan. The heavens had opened and the Holy Spirit of God descended like a dove. A voice of delighted love came from heaven, "This is *my Son, the Beloved*, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3: 17) God had received pleasure from Jesus' obedience to the God-given mission by putting the plan and will of God *first* to save humanity. The next time these same words will be spoken will be on the Mount of transfiguration when Jesus needed a further 'push along' to go down to Jerusalem, to contest with the grim religious authorities, to lose out and be crucified. A third echo will be made on Calvary by the centurion, "Truly, this man was *God's Son*." (Mark 15:39). Jesus was the God-made-human; the humanity in Jesus had received a first 'push-along' to keep going at his baptism. Now, in the quiet wasteland, Jesus needed to think out, straighten out the way to fulfil the task God had given. Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit, went to a wilderness of hills of crumbling, blistered limestone, of jagged, contorted rocks, all shimmering with blast-furnace heat for forty days to clarify his vocation.

The **first temptation** was to lessen his growling stomach hunger by turning the stones which littered the wasteland into bread loaves. It may seem an odd way to prepare for leadership by starving oneself alone for forty days in a desert. Five hundred years before, Prince

Gautama had done so for forty-six days to find enlightenment as the Buddha. At his baptism, Jesus had heard God say "This is my Son." Temptation asked him to prove it. The temptation was, as God's Son, to use his powers selfishly, to short-circuit enduring the limitations of daily life for a short-term gain. He could so easily turn gibbers into damper to give famished folk a free fast-food outlet (as the manna and water and quails were freely given the Chosen in their wilderness wandering). But this would have been a bribe for the people to follow him for what they could get. This would strip people of the dignity of working to provide, for slick handouts may degrade. People would regard him as little more than a provider of instant material welfare; he would find it a constant problem to keep from becoming such a person and not much more. Jesus calls us to dependence on God and the use of our God-given talents and not on hand-outs. Giving easy bread would have removed the symptoms without healing the disease of hunger. Later, Jesus will say, "Do not set your hearts on things to eat and drink. Set your hearts first on the kingdom of God and these he will give you as well." (Luke 12:29). We may be tempted to ask, "What can I make for myself from this gift/talent/strength I have been given? Can I cash in on my superb intelligence, good looks?"

Jesus was tested to see if he was totally committed. Twelve hundred years before, Israel in the wilderness was only half-hearted. Some preferred the security of a life of slavery to the hunger of freedom in the wilderness and cried out for the former flesh-pots of Egypt. Their empty stomachs made them doubt God. Jesus will answer the tempter, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Deut:6:4) Can people follow God with their whole heart when they are hungry? The fact that Jesus won this first victory did not mean the war was over. This was merely the first battle in the war. He would be tempted all through life. Temptation will return in the near-nervous breakdown in the Garden of Gethsemane when his humanness urged, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." (Matt: 26:39). The temptation continued when he was led out to another dry and desolate location, the skull-like hill of Calvary. There, sillies taunted, "Come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" (Mark 15:32).

Jesus made himself utterly weak to ensure his ministry came from God and not from his own strength. In the first wilderness, he resisted the temptation, angels ministered to him and he emerged strengthened to proclaim the kingdom of God. (Mark 1: 13). On the Calvary desert, he was ministered to by his faithful women disciples and was killed because of the way he implemented and lived out the same kingdom.

Jesus will have further temptations; early in his ministry, his family question his sanity and seek to bring him home; the people in his hometown synagogue are delighted to have the new rabbi, but when he preaches, they want to throw him over a cliff. Later, he will have to tell Simon Peter to "Get behind me, because the way you think is not God's but man's." (Matt. 16:23). Yet, at the end of the day, he will say to his disciples, "You are those who have stood by me in my trials." (Luke 22:28). From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Jesus had to fight temptation. That is why he can help us in our troubles.

Jesus's rejection of the first temptation to compromise his frail human frame gives us the hope that we, too, can glimpse the power of God's goodness in every moment we reject the desire to be directors of our own destiny and so see good triumph over evil in the choices we make.

The **second temptation**: In his mind came a picture of the whole world, which Jesus could take by compromise: come to terms with the world, close your eye to what is going on, don't pitch one's ethical ideals so high, accept the brown-paper-bag of untraceable notes under the table, don't uncompromisingly present God's demands to the world, wink at questionable things, grasp for the kind of power and prestige and wealth that many earthly people seek and people will follow you like hordes. To this, Jesus quoted "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." (Deut. 6:13). But we hear the temptation to "Work double shifts on Sunday; you need the time and a half more than the spiritual food of God's word." Jesus knew you cannot defeat evil by compromise with it. Christianity must not stoop down to the world level; it must lift the world to Christ's standard. You cannot try to better the world by lowering standards, to try to change the world by becoming enmeshed in the world. As a Church, we cannot preach a comfortable gospel and offer cheap grace. Perhaps we are hypnotized by false gods of advertising, and settling for these. Jesus's whole life said "No" to power and lordly authority. He would not build a personal army to take a throne, which caused Judas to become disenchanted. In fact, he based founding his whole kingdom on a group of unlettered, powerless disciples, especially women, saying, "You know that among many pagans the rulers lord it over them and their great ones make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." (Matt: 20:24). Do we ever make our authority felt so that people are degraded?

The **third temptation**: If bread won't do, give them circuses! In his vision, Jesus was lifted up to a pinnacle of the temple, a drop of over 100 metres into the Kedron Valley. Every morning, a temple priest stood at this spot to blow his horn at the first flush of dawn. The thought came, if I am God's Son, could I climb up where everyone will see me as they see the priest, then, chuck myself down from the pinnacle, do a swan dive as a wingless wonder from the temple top to test whether God's love will keep me safe? He was familiar with a Bible promise that angels would bear up the godly lest harm come. "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, no evil shall befall you. He will command his angels to guard you in all your ways. In their hands they will bear you up." (Psalm 91: 9-11). This was a temptation to test how much God loves one by seeking to limit suffering and death, which means to save us from being human. "No," said Jesus. He will not seek personal security by bargaining with God; he will trust in God's dependability. Jesus taught that his followers would be *saved*; he did not promise we would be *safe*. A second reason that Jesus said "No" to throwing himself from the pinnacle was: if you seek to attract followers by providing sensations, you will need to provide ever greater trendy sensations as wonders are only 'nine-day-wonders.' This year's sensation is next year's commonplace. There is only a temporary life in offering cheap-thrill entertainment, but not eternal life. We must not take

risks to enhance our prestige, putting ourselves recklessly in harm's way and expect God to rescue us. God's rescuing power is not something to be tested, but to be quietly trusted in life. (You cannot cover yourself in Prayer and throw yourself in front of a pit-bull and expect God's rescue.) If our faith cannot believe without signs and wonders, it may not be faith, but doubt looking for proof. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." (Deut 6:16).

It was not easy for Jesus to repel the temptations, which he did by prayer, fasting, reflection on and obedience to how he perceived the word and will of God. His death on Calvary proved that he loved more than life itself. There, he could have called on legions of angels to save him from harm, but, to model our suffering death, he *could* not.

Conclusion: temptation is not sinful, not a bad thing. Temptation is the allure that makes destructive choices look good. It cons us into believing that destructive behaviour is "not that bad," it will be 'just this once," and "for the last time." A good side of temptation is it forces us to choose between doing God's will and our will and, by learning to deal with these, makes us stronger. As Jesus learned, temptations may come as a reaction to some great moment, when life has lifted us to the heights, then our resistance can dive. They can come when we are feeling most deserted and vulnerable, when our self-esteem is low. (I was so ugly at birth that my parents sued the hospital for *not* mixing up the babies!) Temptations are *inner* thoughts and desires; (there was no mountain high enough from which Jesus could see all the kingdoms of the world!) We can be tempted through our special gifts and qualities; gifted with charm, I can get away with anything; gifted with the power of words I can be tempted to use glib excuses to justify my conduct. "If you want to know what victory over temptation costs, don't ask a sinner, ask a saint," as those who struggle with temptation and overcome it, know it best. In all of us is a strain of rebelliousness, self-centredness, short-sightedness, which can cause us to take our *LIVE* and to distort it into its reverse *EVIL*. Every right choice made makes the next right choice easier; doing the right thing often enough eventually becomes second nature to us. Practising Lenten penances, saying "NO" to our selfish choices, by the grace of God, lets us tend further towards perfection. Lent provides us with a wilderness opportunity to look at our life to see how we may be a better follower of Jesus at its end. Thanks to Jesus, we do not have to battle on our own. We are part of the Body of Christ, and share what he and innumerable others have already won. The Holy Spirit was with Jesus in his struggle and is with us in ours. If we are led by the same Holy Spirit, why did we ever think we would not be tested?

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