

1st Sunday of Lent (C)
(Deuteronomy 26:4-10 / Luke 4:1-13)
14.02.2016
Temptation

As we set out on our Lenten journey on the First Sunday of this liturgical season we are led each year to listen to one of the gospel accounts of the Temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. I find there is something greatly consoling for us to hear this gospel story year after year, for temptation will always be part of our lives. Temptation will take on different shapes and forms as the years pass by, of course, but it will always be there, no matter what our age or the circumstances of our existence. Temptation is something we will always have to deal with right up until the end of our journey here on earth.

The film maker grasped this when he made his film entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Whatever about the highly criticised content of the film, its author was on to something that is true when he depicted the man Jesus being subjected to His final temptation even as He hung upon the cross. Yes, Jesus who won for us the grace of our salvation, was a man like us in every way and so He too was tempted, even though He never gave into sin.

I always remember one of the brethren of Worth Abbey making a quip remark in the television series *The Monastery* when one of the participants in the project quizzed him about temptations. The monk in question said: *Temptation will finally leave us about fifteen minutes after our death.*

Some years ago a Christian publication put out a questionnaire about temptation, asking what forms it took on for its readers. Different answers were proffered. Readers wrote back about such temptations as materialism, pride, self-centredness, laziness, anger, lust, gluttony and lying. Other temptations could surely be added to that list. There are temptations such as discouragement, envy, jealousy, self-loathing, sectarianism, indifference to others, ignorance of them, and many other things besides which could also have been named. I am sure some of us here would have yet other temptations that assail them that could be added to these lists.

What was striking in response to the survey done by the Christian magazine was that most people said that they were more susceptible to feeling tempted and giving into their temptations when they were neglecting their relationship with God and failing to give time to prayer. They added that this happened especially when they were physically tired. I know for me temptation is more likely to tug at me and pull me down when I am physically exhausted and emotionally drained. I realise this to be just as true for many people known to me.

But, it is also true that temptations are just as likely to befall us when we are striving to be faithful to prayer and accomplishing God's work. Frequently, I find that it is when things are really blessed in our existence and God is using us greatly in His service that we are at our most vulnerable. I am sure many people find that it is precisely at such times that they are likely to be tripped up and pulled down by the tug of temptation. Jesus' experience bears this out. Jesus underwent His temptations as He embarked upon His forty day retreat in preparation for His public ministry, just after His baptism by John in the River Jordan at that graced moment when He heard the Father's voice confirm Him in His identity as God's Beloved Son. Jesus was tempted at a time when He was being led by the Spirit. The gospel tells us clearly that He was led out into the desert by the Spirit of God.

In the light of all I have just said, it seems to me that the gospel account of Jesus' temptations can be received by us as a word of encouragement and as a word of hope as we set out on our annual Lenten observance. It comes to encourage us for those times when we are tempted.

It is surely consoling for us to recognise through our reading of today's gospel story how it was precisely through His experience of trial and temptation that Jesus was strengthened to live the essence of His mission which was to reveal God's presence at work in His humanity. Likewise trial and temptation can serve us well. Indeed, there is a saying of a Desert Father which states *without temptation one cannot be saved*. Temptation can even be our saving grace. It can be what keeps us grounded and humble – especially if and when God is using us greatly, working mightily in our lives.

Many of the great monastic teachers over the centuries have made much the same point: John Chrysostom and Thomas a Kempis are but two whose teaching on this subject spring to my mind, but a whole host of others could surely be evoked. There is an agreement among these and other great spiritual masters that temptation and trial, consciousness of one's weakness, and even the experience of failure and fall, are quasi-indispensable for our spiritual welfare and growth.

I suppose the first great consolation and hope given to us, the assurance we hold in our hearts, as we face up to temptation and trials in our lives – and, let's face it, who doesn't? – is that we are not alone in our combat: we have been preceded by Christ and He remains with us in the struggle.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews reassures us when he tells us: ... *Christ Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able therefore to help those who are tempted ... Christ is with us when we struggle ...* The author of Hebrews goes on to say: *We have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* (Cf. Hebrews 2: 18 / 4: 15)

That sounds consoling, we might say. However, we might then just as quickly interject: but is it entirely true?

Has Jesus really been tempted in *every* respect as we are?

Could He have ever been tempted in all the ways that *we* are?

Someone has remarked: *When we pause to consider the nature of some temptations, the grosser and more insidious variety, it might seem almost blasphemous to pursue the thought any further. And yet, if we back off in fright and refuse even to consider Christ's temptations, we at once lose an enormous resource of power to help us in our pilgrimage through life. For Christ was not only tempted in every respect – He overcame in every respect, giving us a living example of how God does, with the temptation, provide a way of escape.*

Understand me. I am not saying that the particular temptations of Jesus did not have not have a particular historical context. They did. So too, our particular temptations will have a particular historical/cultural context.

The particular circumstances of Jesus' life and of ours are at quite a distance from each other: historically, culturally, socially. But that does not mean that what Jesus underwent by way of temptation is incomparable to what we undergo. We shouldn't dismiss Jesus' experience as irrelevant to ours.

Fair enough, Jesus would not have been tempted to engage in unhealthy internet browsing. He simply couldn't have been tempted in that particular way. Jesus could not have brought up things on a computer screen that we can bring up with just the flick of a switch, for the simple reason that there were no computers in His day.

The world of Jesus was very different to ours at the external level.

But there were ways of feeding lusts and unhealthy sexual curiosity in Jesus' time, just as there are in ours.

It could also be said that Jesus did not live in our consumer, rat-race, highly driven society, but that does not mean that He did not encounter greed and power struggles all around Him.

These temptations took on a different form than they do in our executive board rooms today, but they were already there, present and active, in Jesus' day and age.

Fair enough, Jesus did not live in a world of multi-national corporations, with people globe-trotting here, there and everywhere, exploiting under-developed countries on the way in order to feed their particular consumerist first world nation, but that does not mean that Jesus did not encounter exploitation of the poor, cheating, fraud, and all the other things that menace good and just relationships in the human family.

Temptation comes to us under many exterior forms. These may be – indeed, they necessarily will be – shaped by the time and place wherein we live. But, *essentially* – and this is what I would want to underline this morning – *in essence*, it is the same struggle we are caught up in and this in solidarity with all humanity from across the ages and right across the globe.

If temptation comes to us in a myriad of guises, always subtly suited to our particular personality and condition, basically it has one objective: to turn us from the truth, about God, about our self, about the world around us.

That is how it started and how it has continued ever since the Tempter first appeared on the scene in the Book of Genesis, distorting our first parents vision of God, themselves and others.

Temptation always seeks to wean us away from God, from our true selves and from others.

To quote a contemporary Anglican writer: *Temptation tries to win our allegiance so that we deviate from the path leading to true humanity and fullness of being. It entices us to enter the twilight world of falsity and masquerade.*

The thought expressed there ties in with what Thomas Merton states at one point in his writings when he says: *Sin is ... an orientation to falsity, a basic lie concerning our deepest reality ... The false self is a whole syndrome of lies and illusions that spring from a radical rejection of God in whom alone we find our own truth and ultimate identity.*

When we look at the temptations suggested to Jesus in the desert, in essence they were calling upon Him to deny, reject and try to bypass His human condition.

In essence all our temptations seek to distort and destroy our identity as children of God called to live our humanity as the way to our *divinisation*.

Yes, the Tempter, ever since Eden, is forever trying to delude us. He is forever trying to make us usurp on God, with this goal in view: to dash us to the ground and destroy us, as much as to take away from God's glory.

When we give in to the Tempter's wiles, what he succeeds in doing is to de-humanise us.

Something that Jesus could see – but to which we are so often blind – was that Satan's tactic was to try to persuade Him to pursue right ends by wrong means.

Let me explain myself.

In a sense, what the devil suggested to Jesus sounded good. He invited Jesus to prove Himself and even enhance His ministry.

Satan's suggestions could be seen as ways whereby Jesus might win over those to whom He had been sent. If Jesus had have done as the Tempter suggested, would he not have proved to the people that He was, in fact, the Son of God sent to redeem them?

Had the Father not sent Jesus into the world to give us bread from heaven? Had the Father not sent Jesus into the world to reveal to humanity that He was God-with-us? Did the Father not want Jesus to be recognised as king over all?

All this was God's will, but it was not God's will that it should come about by the means the Tempter suggested.

In the Father's plan, it was by being fully human that the Christ was to prove that he was divine.

This was in order to lead us to see that it is by living our humanity fully and truly, that we will be raised with Christ, *divinised*, our Orthodox brothers and sisters would say. Our Eastern brothers and sisters dare to use this term *divinised*, because they suffer less from the shyness we are inclined to have in the West when it comes to the glory that is ours because of our identity as human beings made in God's image and likeness.

What is all this saying to us, if not that we are called to go to God by being fully human?!

The poor, fragile, frail, weak human beings we all are, are called to share in God's glory. Called to be great, we are, of course – and we know this by experience – weak, poor, fragile and frail. Our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy reminded us of the humility of the origins of God's Chosen People, of whom we are the spiritual descendants. This reminder was salutary to the Israelites and it is salutary to us.

We should never forget that as a result of our wounded human nature – a woundedness rooted in our first parents having given into the Tempter's wiles, which pulled them away from their humanity – none of us has complete control over our minds, our memories, our imaginations, our wills, our passions, our emotions. We are left weakened and we struggle in all these domains. The fall from grace of our first parents has grievously wounded our human nature.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that suffering from temptation is part of our plight as members of fallen humanity. It speaks of temptation as being part of our daily experience of the spiritual battle.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council, for its part is clear: *History is a story of combat*. The Council Fathers went on to state: *Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield man has to struggle to do what is right*. There is no denial of the human struggle there, but there is also a word of hope beyond it. The Council Fathers go on to say: *At great cost to himself and aided by God's grace man succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity*.

It is to be hoped that this Lent will see all of us growing in humanity, growing in integrity, growing in a sense of our unique dignity – growing in what the Church Fathers dare to call our *nobility* as human beings who know themselves to be nothing less than God's own children, loved into being by our Heavenly Father, called to share in God's life with Christ-Jesus, who came into this world to share with us His own life in God.