

First Sunday in Lent - February 26, 2023

(using the Good News translation)

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

15 Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it. 16 He told him, "You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, 17 except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day." ... 3:1 Now the snake was the most cunning animal that the Lord God had made. The snake asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?" 2 "We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden," the woman answered, 3 "except the tree in the middle of it. God told us not to eat the fruit of that tree or even touch it; if we do, we will die." 4 The snake replied, "That's not true; you will not die. 5 God said that because he knows that when you eat it, you will be like God and know what is good and what is bad." 6 The woman saw how beautiful the tree was and how good its fruit would be to eat, and she thought how wonderful it would be to become wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband. 7 As soon as they had eaten it, they were given understanding and realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and covered themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. 2 After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry. 3 Then the Devil came to him and said, "If you are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread." 4 But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks.' " 5 Then the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, the Holy City, set him on the highest point of the Temple, 6 and said to him, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down, for the scripture says, 'God will give orders to his angels about you; they will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.' " 7 Jesus answered, "But the scripture also says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " 8 Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in all their greatness. 9 "All this I will give you," the Devil said, "if you kneel down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus answered, "Go away, Satan! The scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!' " 11 Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him.

Focus: Remaining faithful amid temptations

Function: To encourage people to stand firm in Christ when faced with temptations.

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Lent. Lent is the season of preparation and discipline as we follow Jesus toward Jerusalem, journeying with him to his suffering and, eventually, his death. Over these 6 Sundays in Lent, the Church remembers the life and ministry of Jesus and renews its commitment to him in Christian discipleship. However, it will not simply be an inward preparation but an outward one as well. We are urged to be mindful of the suffering experienced by so many people in our world right now. There are people displaced by wars, conflicts & violence; people plagued by drought or floods; people ravaged by bushfires, cyclones or earthquakes, people marginalised by mental health issues or social stigma, and so on.

However, life's busyness often gets in our way, leading us to focus on ourselves or our loved ones rather than helping others in need. For younger people, perhaps studying or building a career is the focus. For others, courtship, marriage & family life dominate, while health and retirement may become burdensome for some elderly.

And very often, we are lured by temptations in many ways to look the other way rather than God's way. Indeed, temptation comes in moments when we see others better than ourselves and feel insecure about not having or doing enough. Temptation draws us to turn a blind eye to those in need and live our lives ignoring poverty, hunger & disease around us. Temptation keeps us self-satisfied with our lifestyle and habits, oblivious of the harm & damage we are inflicting on ourselves, and the environment, adding to global warming.

Temptation wants us to justify little lies and minor sins. For example, we may think it's alright about a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, or a criticism of someone's life or lifestyle choice which we don't understand. Temptation aims to get us so caught up with the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself.

Fittingly, our first reading from Genesis reminds us of how Adam & Eve were tempted and succumbed. God instructed Adam & Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree that gave knowledge of what is good and what is bad, or else they will die. Temptation may come in any form, and in this case, a snake convincing Eve that she will not die by eating the fruit but will become wise instead. So from being curious about the taste of the eye-pleasing fruit to desiring to be wise, Eve was enticed and ate the fruit eventually. And what about Adam? I believe he was as curious and desirous as Eve of having the fruit since he had not stopped her from eating or rejected her when she gave him the fruit.

And if we continue reading Genesis 3, when God questioned them, Adam blamed God for giving him Eve, who had given him the fruit, while Eve blamed the snake for tricking her into eating it.

Don't we find this all too familiar? We fall to temptations too easily, brushing God's instructions and warnings aside. And when caught out, we quickly find excuses to shift the blame or justify our actions. In our opinion, we are never at fault.

That means to say, temptation is a desire deep within us searching for short-term or immediate satisfaction but disregarding the longer-term costs. And the tempter uses any person, animal, thing, or situation to entice us and draw out that desire within us, ignoring the consequences that will strain our relationship with God.

This is precisely what the Devil does. He lures us into the trap of desiring more, but without the warning of the consequences. And in this case, he told Adam & Eve that once they eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they will not die, but will be like God, knowing what is good and what is bad.

In the Gospel reading, we hear the account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and the ploy of the tempter is clearly outlined. Jesus has set for us the example to reject the tempter's trick by focusing on God and God's word.

Firstly, the tempter lured Jesus when he was very vulnerable. He had gone without food for 40 days & nights, hence, very hungry & weak.

Like most people, I can hardly have any energy when I'm very hungry, I would become listless, and I don't think I can remain me if I have to fast for a day, less to say forty. So, I think there's much truth in the idiom "a hungry man is an angry man;" we easily lose our common sense when hungry. And so, if we put ourselves in Jesus's shoes, having fasted 40 days & nights, how hungry and vulnerable we would be. And it is in such vulnerability that Jesus was tempted to satisfy his immediate needs by giving the command to turn stones into bread, which he, being the Son of God, is indeed fully capable of doing.

Would you have given in if you were in the same situation?

Most of us, if not all, have had moments where we were impulsive and thoughtless. Perhaps, we were late for an appointment or event, we began to drive faster than usual, and thoughtlessly, we exceeded the speed limit and even ran the red lights.

And when we hit a wall in life – may be a financial crisis, a hostile relationship, or a health emergency – we are often tempted to resolve our immediate problems and ease our needs ASAP. When we are desperate, when we are in despair, all we

can think of may just be our immediate needs. The Devil will use our desperation or despair to draw us away from relying on God, from trusting in God by casting doubt about God being far away or too busy for us. And the more we entertain these thoughts, the more we feel lonely and desperate.

But Jesus reminds and assures us that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (v. 4) Jesus’s response by citing Deuteronomy 8:3 reminds us not to focus on ourselves & our needs, but focus on God entirely. In all life’s situations, God is in control and is watching over us. God’s provision is far better than what we could ever imagine; we just need to trust in God and God’s timing.

Next, The Devil challenged Jesus to manipulate God by throwing himself down from the top of the temple so that God could save him (v. 6). In our context, it could be that we know God loves us, and so we think God will protect us and bless us for whatever will happen. And sometimes, we are tempted to wilfully do certain things, or walk in our own way, thinking that God will still bless us.

Jesus’s reply is direct: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, which reads fully as “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah.” Thirst drove the ancient Israelites to become desperate as they wandered in the wilderness, and they grumbled against God for bringing them out to die in the desert.

We are reminded today not to let the worries and troubles of each day rob us of our focus on God, tempting us to race ahead of God, especially when God seems far away. We will put God to the test when we do certain things wilfully and expect God to follow up and bless the outcomes.

Do you do that sometimes, expecting God to say YES to your prayers?

Then finally, the Devil seduced Jesus to forgo his mission to fulfil God’s will for humanity by accepting his offer of the glory & power of the worldly kingdoms; all Jesus needed to do was to fall down and worship him (v. 8-9).

For Jesus, the way ahead to carry out God’s will is going to be extremely difficult because he will eventually have to face excruciating torture and, finally, death on the cross. Satan’s offer to escape from all these hardships and to be able to enjoy the immediate splendour of the world seems very attractive, isn’t it? This is often the case in our lives, too, isn’t it?

The easier way out of our troubled situations in life or a good shortcut to success always seems so convincing. The Tempter is always lurking around, waiting for the opportunity to tempt us to accept his offer of the easier way and forsake God’s way.

Today, as we begin the season of Lent, let us follow Jesus in his way. Remain faithful to God amid temptations by always turning to God's word for solace, strength, peace and hope in all life's situations, no matter good or bad. And let us be attentive to the soft voice of the Holy Spirit, who will guide us and encourage us to keep on following Christ. Amen.

Benediction

So now we leave this space of worship
And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain,
with the path constantly changing,
we know some things that are as solid and sure
as the ground beneath our feet,
and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.
We know Christ's light endures.
We know the Holy Spirit is there
with us in all life's situations,
closer to us than our next breath,
binding us to each other.
And until we meet again,
we go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ. Amen.