


WE ALL ARE TEMPTED, AS HE WAS

Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7

Romans 5. 12-19

Matthew 4. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Last Sunday, those of you who attended the Family Service at 9.30am will remember that we had a discussion about bumper stickers, and I showed a number of examples of bumper stickers to the children. One bumper sticker that I did *not* show them, however, was this one: ‘Lead me not into temptation: I can find it by myself.’ Cheeky humour aside, we know that God never actively leads us to sin and does not actively lead us to temptation (although this need not rule out God’s ability to test our faith). God is not the author of sin and is, therefore, not eager to trip us up where sin is concerned.

Our compassionate God is not in the business of tossing us into a locked closet with the devil and then waiting to see how we fare. In the Lord’s Prayer, when we pray ‘lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’, we do so knowing up front that God desires to deliver us from evil and not to lure us into sin.

All well and good. Except when we read the first verse of chapter four of Matthew’s gospel (as we have done this morning), we learn that the very *Spirit of God* led our Lord into the wilderness¹ to be tempted by the devil. Jesus was led into temptation. By the Spirit. Hmm.

¹ The Synoptic Gospels all begin with our Lord being tempted in the wilderness. This is how his ministry had to start: Jesus had to go to the desert, to the wilderness, to that biblical encapsulation of the chaos of evil. Christ had to enter the place of death to begin making all things alive and new again. In the wilderness, God built his highway to salvation: where else but the wilderness did that road to life need to begin?

This statement is indeed striking. But it contains hope for us, too. No, God does not lead us into temptation. Instead he delivers us from evil. But one of the main reasons we can be sure of this is precisely because Christ was led into temptation *on our behalf* so as to ensure that we would never face this ourselves.

Matthew's gospel, particularly in its early chapters, is fairly drenched in Old Testament quotations. Almost everything is said to be the fulfilment of one prophecy or another. Writing for a Jewish reading audience, Matthew knew that those with eyes to see and ears to hear would discern that in this man Jesus, the history of Israel was being reviewed and repeated. Having been called out of Egypt once upon a time as an infant with his parents,² our Lord is now enduring a wilderness period of trial and temptation, just as the Israelites did with Moses.

But in every instance, where Israel historically failed, Christ succeeds. He is the New Israel; and it would have escaped no one's notice that each time our Lord repels one of the devil's blows with a Scripture quotation, the verses that get quoted come from Deuteronomy, which was the charter for Israel's saved life in the Promised Land. If the word 'Deuteronomy' is literally *deuteros nomos*, or 'the law a second time', then Jesus in the wilderness is *Israel in the wilderness* a second time; but this time Christ succeeds where Israel blew it.

Even though God may not lead us to temptation in quite the same way that our Lord was placed in a perilous position, curiously enough the struggles that Jesus endured remain common to us all.

Consider Christ's first temptation, for example. We all find ourselves at times still tempted by the instant gratification that leads us to forget our need to trust God's Word over the long haul. Recently, I was amused to read that Joe Osteen, an

² Cf. Mt 2. 15.

American pastor, has achieved phenomenal success as a writer and as a speaker, and has accumulated a personal fortune of between forty and sixty million dollars. His first book (one of seven), entitled *Your Best Life Now*, has sold more than eight million copies. I dare to say that the book wouldn't have had the same success if its title were along the lines of *Your Hard Life Now: Feasting on God's Word in the Deserts of Life*.

And as we consider our Lord's second temptation, we all have to confess that we are tempted to do silly things to see if God's Word is true. We may not be tempted to throw ourselves off high buildings necessarily, but we have been known to pray things like, 'O God, if you love me and desire what's best for me, give me this new job I want . . . or help me get enough money to buy that car I want . . .' Trusting in God's Word is one thing, but once in a while we'd like to see God act in ways that benefit us in tangible terms.

And as far as Jesus's third temptation is concerned, in myriad ways we are all tempted to make the kingdoms of this world our own domains by taking shortcuts, engaging in cut-throat tactics, telling little lies (or big lies), working ourselves half to death, and so in all these ways to bow the knee to the false gods of money, success, power and prestige. If God won't put us on the top of the heap, well then we'll get there on our own; and do whatever is necessary to feather our own nest.

The Temptations of Christ present a microcosm of what we all face. Yet they also suggest how we can remain faithful to God; because God will (as he did with his Son) provide us with a way out;³ or should I say, a way *forward*. He will enable to live lives of grace, even though this may mean at times facing and enduring difficult moments.

³ Cf. 1 Cor 10. 13.

Our Lord was right to feast on God's Word instead of the quick and easy words by which he could have turned stones into bread. But at the end of Temptation Number One, he was still powerfully hungry.

Jesus was right to not put God to the test and to trust that God's care for him was every bit as powerful as he claimed it to be. But at the end of Temptation Number Two, his faith remained vulnerable, for God had not yet put in an appearance.

And Christ was right to refuse grabbing for the kingdoms of this world by worshipping that which must not be worshipped. But at the end of Temptation Number Three,⁴ Jesus remained on a path that would indeed lead him to become the Lord of this world's kingdoms; but that path led straight to a place called Golgotha.

It is precisely the fact that faithfulness can lead to suffering and deprivation that makes the devil's temptations so powerfully alluring in the first place. It's a vicious cycle. Our hope in Lent (and at all times) is to stick close to the Saviour who has already promised *in grace to stick close to us*, even when we're hungry, vulnerable and walking a desert path that leads to a cross.

Amen.

⁴ Many conclude mistakenly that the devil never bothered Christ again. The gospel of St Luke tells us that 'the devil left him until a more opportune time' (4. 13). This was only the beginning of our Lord's temptations and of his being battered by Satan.