

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Or as the AV has it: “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”

Who was it who said: “I can resist everything except temptation”? That is certainly one way of dealing with what is a universal experience, and for those who have no moral scruples, temptation presents no problem. But for those of us who seek to respond to God’s grace there are important choices to be made between right and wrong – and with the added burden of being called on to live in a way which commends the one in whom we trust. This means that for us, life can be taxing at times.

It was H.O. Fanning who rightly commented:

“Temptations divide the world into two classes; those who fail and go down under them and those who meet them successfully and gain strength of character through overcoming them. To the one class they are stumbling blocks; to the other they are stepping-stones. To the one they are hindrances; to the other they are helps. It is not our temptations but the way we respond to them that counts.”

Too often when faced with temptation we don’t give ourselves enough time both to pray for strength, and also to consider the matter properly. It is all too easy to rush ahead and find that we’ve acted in a way we later regret. You’ll remember the story of the wife of a young clergyman who went shopping. Whilst out she saw a dress in a shop window which she simply loved and thought she’d just try on. Of course, she bought it! When she got home and told her husband, he remonstrated with her: “You know we can’t afford it.” He said. “Didn’t you pray ‘get thee behind me, Satan?’” “Yes, dear,” she replied. “I did say that, and he got behind me and said: ‘It looks very nice from the back!’”

I’ve no doubt that’s happened to most of us at some time. The heartening thing is that we come to one who knows about temptation. This morning’s gospel reminds us of this, as Jesus starts his public ministry after years of preparation. After his baptism by John, he went off alone into the wilderness to reflect on how his ministry should best be conducted.

Being short of food, I’ve no doubt his mind turned naturally towards the poor and how popular it would be to meet their bodily needs – a sure way of winning support. In fact, it would guarantee no such thing. For once our bodily needs are met we seek other things to occupy our minds, and not least to take charge of our own destiny. It’s a hard lesson to learn, and one which these days too many fail to appreciate, that it is not material things which make for happiness, but spiritual. As St Augustine saw and expressed in a prayer: “that our hearts are restless till they rest in God.”

How about turning to political power to achieve his purpose? Change the system and start by getting rid of the Roman occupiers; there’d be plenty of support from his countrymen. But politics means compromise and taking decisions which inevitably antagonise others. It means supping with the devil, often having to choose between the lesser of two evils. It means the willingness to be ruthless. This was no way to build the Kingdom of God.

So how about using sensation to capture the attention of people? People love to see something spectacular. Jumping off the roof of the Temple and floating harmlessly down would certainly have done this. But for how long? The Romans knew how quickly the senses become jaded and needed ever more extravagant spectacles to hold people’s attention. No, this way would simply make Jesus a three-day wonder, as interest would quickly fade as they got on with life.

Jesus saw that the only one way to win hearts and minds was the way of obedience and service which demonstrated the meaning of love; and which did not coerce people, but left them the freedom to respond. And this has to be our way, too. It is as we live close to God that we are strengthened and given the power to resist temptation.

Like the man who struggled against a particular temptation, but always fell. He consulted a psychiatrist, but this, too, was no help. In desperation, he knelt down in prayer and God gave him

the power to overcome his problem, and realized that he should have turned to God first & not last. It's not a case of our willpower, but if we have the will, God has the power.

The days of Lent are given us that we may make a real effort to grow our faith; to be a time, not of unremitting boredom as some imply, but of excitement as we discover new things through a Lenten discipline. Every Christian ought to take this seriously, as seriously as the Moslems fast through Ramadan each year.

Each of us should sit down and reflect upon our lives – how we spend our time, what things, perhaps, should be given up, and perhaps more importantly, what things we should take up – more time for prayer and reading; being more regular at the Eucharist, more generous with our giving. Maybe there are requests for help we've resisted, and yet we know we have skills which could meet the need. But whatever we do, to do it with a sense of adventure.

We do this, not simply to enhance our own spiritual lives, but in order to make us better prepared to be Christ's witnesses day by day. Though we live in a secular and doubting age, there is, I believe, a real hunger for genuine godliness, to which they will respond. It is by the quality of our lives, first of all, which shows itself through courtesy, service, patience, trustworthiness, good humour, integrity, purity of living, sensitivity and generosity. These are the marks of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

But it is also important to remember that we are also called on to speak of Jesus. To do this we don't have to be theologians, but rather in general conversations, where appropriate, to talk of our own experience of faith – and to remember that such opportunities occur every day. For example, in someone commenting on the problem of the refugees, to reply, "Yes, it's difficult to know what we can do? But I do pray daily for them, and donate to one of the Aid charities."

You'll remember the story of the docker who'd been a drunkard as were most of his mates, but he'd come to faith in Jesus and turned his life around. One day a fellow worker was mocking him and asked: "You don't believe that story of Jesus turning water into wine, do you?" He replied: "I don't know about that, but in my house he's changed beer into food for the children, and whiskey into fuel for the fire."

I'll end with two cautionary tales

An overweight man decided that Lent was a good time to lose a few pounds. He went on a diet, encouraged by his colleagues, and took it seriously. He changed his normal route to work in order to avoid a high-class baker's shop where he had been in the habit of stopping off to buy one of their delicious cakes for his 11's. However, one day midway through Lent, he arrived at the office carrying a large, sugar-coated, calorie-loaded coffee cake.

His colleagues chided him, but he only smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "What could I do?" he asked. "This is a very special cake. By force of habit I found myself coming to work via my old route, and there in the window was a wonderful display of cakes.

"Being tempted, I prayed for strength to resist: 'Lord, if you really want me to have one of those delicious cakes, let me find a parking space right in front of the shop.' And do you know, sure enough, on the 6th time round, there was."

Every Wednesday a man went into his local and ordered 3 pints of beer, which he drank by himself. The barmaid's curiosity was kindled and asked why he did this. He explained that every week he used to meet his two brothers and they enjoyed a pint together. They had both had to go and work abroad and they agreed that wherever they were, they would buy three pints and drink each other's health. The barmaid was tickled by this and was upset some weeks later to see that he'd only bought 2 pints. She asked him if anything had happened to his brother. "Oh no," he replied, "it's nothing like that. You see, I've given up beer for Lent."