

First Sunday of Lent
Year C - 10/3/2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91
Romans 10:8b-13;
Luke 4:1-15

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Every year, on this the first Sunday in Lent, we receive the same story, told in each of the 3 Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And in some ways it is like a touchstone. “Oh, the temptation of Jesus”, we say, and we click into our Lenten mode! Why? Well, perhaps it is just because this story, more than any of the others about Jesus, is easy for us as human beings to relate to. Because not one of us can ever say that we have not a) been tempted, and b) given in to temptation. At least, I’ve never met anyone who could say that.

A couple of years ago now, when we were living in Melbourne, there was an article published in *The Age*, which was ostensibly about how the techniques used in advertising were perhaps the best example of how we might understand more about temptation. Without wanting to offend anyone here who might be in that industry, and without saying that advertising is inherently evil, although at times it has a lot to answer for, it is true to say that the job of the advertisers is to find successful ways of tempting us to buy things we might not have otherwise bought or do things we might not have otherwise done.

For the most part, neither advertising nor demonic temptation present you with an obvious or rational proposal that seeks to persuade you that this action or product or viewpoint is superior to the alternatives. The article suggested that instead: “advertisers tend to dispense with the appeal to reason altogether, preferring more basic levers such as humour, greed, gluttony, sympathy and arousal.” And one of the things that is emphasized most in advertising, is *yearning*. It seeks to fan the embers of a vague dissatisfaction, a vague feeling that there must be something more that I’m missing out on.

If they can make me feel a yearning for something more, for something that presently leaves my life a little incomplete, and then make me feel that satisfaction is at hand and it has something to do with their product, then they are well on the way to seducing me into pulling out the credit card.

Often the creation of this yearning is done by questioning my image of myself. If you were the man you should be, wouldn't your face feel smooth every time your beloved touched your skin? If you were the parent you should be, wouldn't you be driving a safer car than the one you presently have? If you were the priest you should be, wouldn't you be using this program that is winning countless souls in California? If, if, if. And the yearning is triggered.

If only . . . If only . . . And if that yearning works its way into me, and if I don't counter it with an antidote, I begin to succumb to the temptation to reach for the offered quick fix. I might not even really believe it. I might even be laughing at the unlikeliness of it. But if it goes unchecked, I will eventually secretly think, "There's nothing to lose by trying it, is there?" and I'll reach for my wallet.

This is exactly what the Apostle Luke tells us the devil did to Jesus. If, if, if. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." Can you hear that? "If you were the sort of son of God you should be, wouldn't you be doing something about the problem of hunger?" "If you were the sort of son of God you should be, wouldn't you be letting everyone see what you can do so that they would know to follow you and trust you?"

Even the temptation to worship the devil in return for authority is not that obviously evil when you think about it. "If you were the sort of leader of humanity you should be, wouldn't it be more realistic to cut a deal with me in return for the authority to fulfill your mission unopposed. Just pay the bribe and it's all yours."

The second half sounds like an appeal to reason and logic, but the real power of the temptation is in the first half: “If you were the man you should be . . .” “Shouldn’t you be more? Isn’t there something missing? We can help?”

If we have invested too much in the stylised images of the demonic world, we might begin at this point to read them into this story. We begin to see a devil with horns and a tail and handfuls of flame suggesting to Jesus that he should come over to the dark side because evil is so much more fun. But, in fact, the story doesn’t say that the devil appeared to Jesus at all. The devil comes to him, and speaks to him, and leads him somewhere and shows him something, but it doesn’t anywhere say that the devil appeared to him. And even if he did, he wouldn’t have been wearing a name tag and carrying a job description. There is almost certainly nothing in this story that would have looked anything like what our ideas of the devil might be.

And that’s the reality of our own temptations; they don’t get presented to us by a guy with fiery red skin and horns and all neatly labeled, “Temptation from the pit of Hell”. They didn’t for Jesus either, and even the way this story is told is surely more a summary of the kinds of temptation he faced throughout his life rather than a single incident that got temptation over and done with.

So, if one of the themes of this season of Lent is toughening ourselves up in the face of temptation, what can we learn here about boosting our resistance? Let me suggest just a couple of things you can do.

“No-one lives by bread alone,” Jesus says. The temptation might not be rational, but the application of reason can be a good antidote. Ask yourself, What is this temptation really about if I question it? Strip away the manipulation and examine the information, and you’ll generally find you’re left with a handful of nothing. It is quite a good exercise if you are watching commercial television. Do it yourself. Question the ads. “What is that ad trying to make me feel?” “What is that ad saying about me?” Unmask them.

Another insight can be seen in Jesus' response to the "just worship me" temptation. Jesus says "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Only God. There is a reminder here that the message you *can* have it all, that you can have it both ways, that you can have your cake and eat it too, is usually a lie. You can't have this, and that too.

There are many things that are simply incompatible with each other, and reaching for the next fix to make you feel better is very often done at the expense of the perfectly adequate things you already have in your possession. You don't need more. You don't need another car, another television, another deodorant, another pair of shoes, another wife. Part of the creation of the yearning is to fan discontent with what you've got. Make choices and accept that choosing one means saying no to another, and then make the most of what you have.

And finally, pray. The number one Lenten discipline: pray. Pray for insight and wisdom and strength. When yearning temptations are stirring, pray that God will help you to see them for what they are. Pray through stories like the one we heard today and ask God to show you where those sorts of temptations play themselves out in your life. The best antidote to "If only, if only, if only" is "Pray, pray, pray." May God bless you on your Lenten journey...

The Lord be with you.