

Lent 1B 2023 SFX

On the first Sunday of Lent we always hear the story of the Temptations. But Mark's account is brief and to the point. Just two short lines. That's it. No stones into bread. No freefalling from the parapet of the Temple. No worshipping at Satan's feet. It is easy to dismiss Mark's version as a poor relation to Matthew and Luke with their three specific temptations. But his account has a dramatic power. These two sentences communicate a great deal.

The first line. *The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness... and was tempted by Satan* What Mark gives us is the force of what is happening. That word 'drove' is more literally 'drives' or as Nicholas King translates it 'hurls. "*And immediately the Spirit hurls him out into the desert.*" That's dramatic! It is the same word that is used for the expulsion of the demons in those miracle stories.

The Spirit drives Jesus out... Jesus is driven out. Because St Mark wants to tell us that it is not just a series of temptations. **It is a battle.** The Spirit would not drive Jesus out for something so tame as temptations like ours, whether you would take the last chocolate biscuit on a plate. It is a battle. Like the battle Jesus would experience in Gethsemane. Jesus has come to confront the forces of darkness, not to have a chat with Screwtape, C.S. Lewis's teasing demon. Jesus will fight all the forces opposed to his Kingdom.

In fact, although all three Gospels use the same word for temptation, in Mark's context it is better translated as '**testing**'. Jesus was sent out to be tested, just as the people of Israel had been tested in the desert, and Abraham was tested with the sacrifice of Isaac, and Job tested in his life, this was really a time of trial. So it is not so much a question of specific temptations. Jesus was placed in an extreme situation.

We must remember that Jesus has only just come up out of the waters of baptism, so maybe St Mark is reminding us that sonship, being children of God, and temptation are part of the same reality. To live consciously as God's children on earth is inevitably going to involve a battle against the darker forces that sometimes seek to overwhelm us.

The Book of Job asks: "*Is not the life of the human on earth a temptation?*" [7:1 - Some ancient translations]. It may be only because we are human that we can be tempted. When salmon leaps for the fisherman's fly it doesn't stop to think. When a swallow is drawn to migrate and suddenly abandons her half-grown brood for Africa, we assume she doesn't feel remorse.

Each day we make choices. We are **more human** if we make many choices; we are less human if we stand back and allow things to happen to us, if we become passive, and allow life to carry us along. Each day we choose how to respond to particular situations.

Temptation forces me to choose between two options, the good and the bad, the giving or the self-serving, the generous or the grasping. My character is revealed by

the choices I make. Instead of seeing temptation as an affliction, perhaps we should welcome it as an opportunity to reassert the values that I want to embody in my life. To become the sort of person I want to be.

We make the distinction between having thoughts and acting on them. If I had a penny for every time someone told me in confession they were troubled by their thoughts, I would be a rich man. But it is what we do with our thoughts that matter.

Oscar Wilde, who is always witty said: *"The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it."* But he is wrong. We don't have to accept every thought. Through prayer and discipline the Holy Spirit can liberate us from the shackles of habit. Again, Wilde said, *"I can resist everything except temptation"*. We dare a different possibility?

God gives us freedom in our choices. Of course, in practical terms, our freedom may know restrictions, we can become constrained by habits or external pressure can influence our actions. But it is the Christian belief that we all have a possibility of turning and of changing.

We pray every day 'lead us not into temptation' because we fear our own weakness and do not depend enough on God's grace. We pray not to be put to the test.

And he remained there for 40 days. Our Lord had his own quarantine, using the original sense of the world.

He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him. What is interesting is that in Mark the beast and the angels coexist, they are there side by side, whereas in Matthew the angels only make their appearance when the temptations are over. In terms of our own experience it seems that Mark is more true to life. Michael Casey, an Australian Cistercian monk who is a friend of mine, wrote: *"This sentence could easily be understood as a statement of Jesus' dual nature, with one foot in the world of the beasts and the other in that of the angels. In a different sense, it is an enigmatic summary of the human condition. We are simultaneously beastly and angelic but we are not mere beasts, and we are certainly not angels."*

What we become depends on what we chose in each situation. It depends how we direct our wills.

Lent is a time when we honestly try to face the beastly and angelic sides of ourselves. To prosper the one, and diminish the other. Identifying those negative factors that knock me off-balance, those disturbing temptations that affect my relationships with God and others. Those things that make me beastly when I would rather side with the angels.

Lent, from the Anglo-Saxon word "lencten" meaning "spring season" is related to the lengthening of the days. We can use this Lent for spiritual spring clean. Out with the old, out with the bad, out with what is rotten, out with the old yeast, to be ready to live in the newness of Easter. Turning towards Christ and turning to each other in love.