

Lent 1 Luke 4:1-13

The shortest sermon ever recorded consisted of the preacher going into the pulpit and quoting Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death", and adding "there has been no change in the rate of pay. Amen".

It's not very fashionable these days to talk about sin and temptation in church, but this is lent, and it is the season for it. And really, isn't it so easy to think that sin has overtaken the world? Not on a personal level, but on a global level. When we hear about Israelis and Palestinians fighting one another, terrorist plots, continued unrest and poverty in Africa, indeed all the bad and depressing things going on in the world, it's so easy to believe in a fallen world. Isn't it just so easy to see how the world has fallen away from goodness?

And isn't it so hard to believe in what Paul says in Romans and what we hear throughout the gospels, that even though the world is fallen, everything is OK because God in Christ loves us, forgives us, and makes all things whole? But when we see the fallen world, we can find it almost impossible to believe that this world, full of so much darkness and sin, is redeemed and hallowed. Can we really believe that Christ, the second Adam, showed us God's goodness, planted more deeply than all that is wrong? It's certainly a challenge for us to believe that and it is possibly the number one argument against believing in God for the atheists and agnostics out there.

And then, in Luke's gospel, we hear about Jesus being tempted by the devil. The story of those temptations is a well-known one, in which simple symbols represent very significant issues. We're going to look at those three temptations more closely.

The first temptation is for Jesus to turn the bread into a stone. This is about doubting God's goodwill towards us. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, and became very hungry. No doubt what he wonders is whether God has forgotten him. The temptation is about more than just a meal, more than just a stone and a piece of bread. It's about taking control, making up for God's apparent forgetfulness or carelessness, doubting God's goodwill. Perhaps doubt of God lies at the root of what is not whole within us. If so, then it needs to be replaced with trust in God's ultimate love and goodness, even when God seems to have deserted us. Jesus doesn't turn the bread into a stone; he commits himself to trust in God's promise of sustenance in the wilderness.

The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the Temple, to be caught by God. This is about trying to manipulate God to do what we want. It could be something simple like praying for a lottery jackpot, or it can be much more subtle, like the temptation presented to Jesus. Why not do something dramatic, to express your faith and call down a wonderful demonstration of God's power?

So often things that we do, with the best of intentions, can fall into this trap of trying to box God into a corner so that he has to act. We can easily set up situations where we force God to act; manipulating events so that we hope only one course of action can result. But can we really present God with a *fait accompli*? All of this begs the question of why we do the things that we do. Is our desire supremely for God's glory, or for our own? Is prayer motivated by self-centred fear, or God-centred trust?

The third temptation is for Jesus to worship the devil in return for earthly power. This is about trying to seek our own short cuts to God's goals. Jesus wanted to win the kingdoms of the world for God, to wrestle them back out of the clutches of evil. But he cannot win them by worshipping evil, even though refusing the offer means a long, hard trek to the cross and beyond. There are no short cuts to spiritual wisdom and maturity - just patient discipleship in the pathway of God.

When we look at the bad things in world, see and hear evil at work, every time we listen to the news, it's so easy to believe in a fallen world – and so difficult to believe that Christ has redeemed the world, that God has made everything alright. But by doing that, which is ever so easy, ever so understandable, we're falling victim to the same temptations that were offered to Jesus. If we can't really trust in God and God's loving power, believing that the goodness, shown to us in Christ, is rooted at the deepest level in our world, our lives, our souls, then we might be in danger of making the mistakes that Jesus might have made.

But how can we trust in God's goodness, avoid manipulating God, and not find our own short cuts to God's purposes? At the heart of the answer is recognising that Jesus walks with us, we are not alone. That he experienced these well documented temptations is reassurance to us that he understands human nature. He has been to the places in which we often find ourselves and he has lived through them perfectly trusting God and he offers us his support as he walks with us. He is able to help; able to save; able to redeem. Not only is he able - he is willing. And not only is he willing, he has already acted, acted to save us and to bring to the world a new day, acted to bring to each of us a new life. We can reach out to Christ, and through Christ reach out to others around us and let them know that there is a better life, a life that is given freely to all who desire it.

We are just beginning the season of Lent. For some of us who have made difficult sacrifices perhaps temptation has already set in. But we need to remember that this is just a means to remind us how we are constantly tempted and give us the opportunity to learn how to better resist that temptation. This is the time when we prepare our hearts and minds to once more live through the events of Holy Week and Easter, Jesus' death and resurrection. It is through those events that we are assured of God's ultimate and complete love for us, and can know the reality that God's hope is our own.