

Lent 1 20126: Temptation

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

This morning's readings centre on the process of temptation in three different contexts. And I thought I would reflect on the process of being tempted this morning. As we reflect on our lives through Lent it seems to me that succumbing to temptations is one those issues we should be addressing.

In doing this I will use the Adam and Eve story as the example.

As some of you know I am a retired evolutionary biologist so what am I doing talking about Adam and Eve? For me, this part of scripture is a story that can teach us important lessons, Jesus' parables. The point, for example of the parable of the good Samaritan is not about a particular person; it is a very Jewish way of describing who is our neighbour. It provides a principle rather than a definition that people can apply whatever their culture and time. While in the western world we like to define things, Jesus and others including writers in Babylon in 500 or 600 BC used a different and less limiting way. All these parables or stories are meant to show deep truths without narrowly defining them; it is about how we behave now, not about how particular characters in the tales behaved then. For example, with Adam and Eve, we are Adam, we are Eve. What can we learn from this very insightful story about the

fundamentals of human behaviour and choices;
about how we should live our lives?

As we travel through the six weeks of teaching in Lent and then to the horror and glory of Easter, we will see God's response and His aid to us in our plight, however today we will only look at the beginning of this journey. The nature of the problem, if you like.

To begin our Lenten journey, we must learn how to recognise and defeat temptation. What is the process of temptation? How can we avoid the slippery slope? The story of Adam and Eve contains powerful insights and describes the stages of temptation. So let us go through them and, as we understand them, see what we can do as we face them in our lives.

The first step is to recognise that we have options in any given circumstance. We have a God-given freedom to choose. In the Adam and Eve story this truth is demonstrated when God says: '*You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,*' Have you ever wondered why the author has God put the tree in the Garden at all? Surely the man and the woman would have been safer if he had simply left it out. So, the first lesson is that God does not want innocents but knowing, adult human beings for his children. God makes this offer to each and every one of us: we can live and grow the way he desires for us to live, and grow,

or we can eat of the tree of good and evil if we so choose.

As Paul says; we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We are called to understand God's hope for us and choose to be obedient. It is not about being obedient because we have no choice; we are not puppets; we have the God-given freedom to choose, and he insists in fact that we do so. As Paul also says, God's laws have been provided as our schoolteacher. In scripture, and prayer and life we must learn what they have to teach us. The good thing is that this means God believes we can grow up, he believes in us and, as we will learn again at Easter and Pentecost he is willing to help us. We will discover that our growth is a joint effort; God works with us for our ultimate good.

So, we are not supposed to avoid growing up; we are to understand the reality and proper rules of life, and act accordingly. But in the process, the way opens for us to choose not to follow them. This brings us to the second step on the pathway of falling to temptation.

We see the second step down the pathway of temptation in the next stage of the Adam and Eve story: 'The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, "*You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die*" But the serpent said to

the woman "You shall not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes shall be open, and you shall be like God, knowing good and evil." So ... the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise".

This step along the pathway of temptation takes place in the imagination. We think about it and imagine making the wrong choice. 'When I see him I will destroy his happiness by saying ...' or, 'she is very desirable I would like to ...' Nothing has been done, but we dwell on it and the idea slowly captures our minds and hearts; we become accustomed to the possibility. Gradually we fill in the details, set the patterns in our minds. Something desirable fills our hearts; embittered feelings become dreams of sweet revenge.

The author makes another insightful point here, in fact it is the central point of the whole story, for the serpent's question raises the deep issue of 'who is central?' in the way we structure our lives - is it God or ourselves? See how cleverly the central issue is hidden - the tree is a delight to the eyes; it will make me wise - nowhere is the issue of choosing who is Lord raised. But this is the way of evil, isn't it? The central choice we must make over and over again is who will I follow this day? But temptation hides it in a cover of glamour or desire or anger or whatever. And we make the fundamental choice as to who is our Lord, almost without noticing, as we dream about the detail.

This battle in the imagination is often the key step leading to our personal failure and it is at this step that we can best combat temptation. If we have the law of God in our hearts, not just on Sunday mornings but all the time, if scripture and prayer and spiritual songs are in our minds, even if only at the back of our minds, we will not make the wrong choice by accident; we will recognise what is being asked of us.

So, after understanding what is required of us the next step is not to allow space in our imagination for wrong options to be contemplated.

Do you have a battle, perhaps a perennial battle, in your imagination on some issue?

It gets complicated though, doesn't it? Trying not to think of something is a really good way to have it constantly on our minds. I will not think about that piece of cake; I will not think about that piece of cake. So we must send our imagination elsewhere. Change the subject entirely; don't dwell on it. More fundamentally and correctly we must change the pattern. It is sort of like losing weight, if you diet you will constantly be thinking about the food that you are not having, however if you effectively change your eating pattern the weight is lost *as a consequence*, not as the central issue. So with God, if we spend our time with him in study and worship and obedient prayer and

action, the right pattern becomes the habitual pattern we follow and we grow as a consequence.

And so to the third step in our slide to failure: opportunity. The trick is to extend this new habit of mind: do not allow the situation to develop. To avoid the hurtful conversation, change the context; do not be alone with her; do not go through the shoe section of the shop. There are a thousand ways to defuse the situation. It is especially important to see what lies behind the temptation and, rather than fight it, deal with the root cause. Anger, desire, greed, selfishness, boredom, pride - all the usual suspects need to be taken to God and set aside by changing the pattern of our lives.

And so to the fourth downward step: This is a most grievous step. It happens when we knowingly act wrongly, choosing for whatever reason to do so. Our defences have been destroyed; we have not accepted the rule of God in this part of our lives, we have allowed our imagination to develop scenarios and then enjoyed them and so, by imaginative repetition, we have become inured to the choices that follow. Then we find ourselves in the right, or more correctly, the wrong situation and we act. In the end however it is all about whom is Lord of our lives, us or God.

The supreme contribution of the Genesis story is that it highlights the one concern that supremely matters - why have we lost contact with God? It

was not due to the kind of world that Adam and Eve had around them in the Garden of Paradise, but the kind of behaviour they showed in it that was the decisive issue. It is our humanity, not our circumstances that needs redemption. So there is a sense in which every woman is Eve and every man is Adam, and the cardinal question for every soul is how it can find the grace to keep itself from repeated rebellion against the Lord of creation?

In this the first week in Lent let us reflect on the pattern of our own lives. Have we developed an adult, rather than a juvenile, understanding of right and wrong, that is, do we have an informed conscience? Does our imagination lead us to spend time thinking about things that are not good for us? Do we have habits of thought that will have undermined our best intentions if we find ourselves in a tempting situation? Are we so beset by some issue that given the opportunity we will knowingly act in a way that we know is wrong?

In English the word 'tempt' has a uniformly and consistently bad meaning. It means to entice one to do wrong, to seek to seduce us into sin, to try to persuade us to take the wrong way. But *peirazein*, the Greek word so translated means 'to test' far more than to tempt in the English sense. God does not tempt us to sin but tests us just as silver is refined. Just as a footballer is pushed to be fit to face bigger and bigger challenges in the

game, so we are tested to be fit for the tasks and spiritual growth that God calls us to.

So, God wants us to be adult, to grow up and be the people he knows we can be. To this end confronting temptation is part of our training. He also knows our weakness and we will see as we come to Easter that He gives us His aid in Christ and through the Holy Spirit to deal with our past behaviour and present need; but first we need to do our own homework and change our life patterns.