

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH LENT 1 2019

When I was about seven years old my parents gave me the *Ladybird* Book of the Lord's Prayer. I actually preferred the book *Tootles the Taxi* which they gave me at more or less the same time. Anyway, the picture accompanying the words 'Lead us not into temptation' showed a little boy climbing onto a chair in the pantry, helped by his big sister, in order to reach a tin of chocolate biscuits.

Now it is not a serious sin to have a chocolate biscuit. It becomes a bit more serious if you've been told not to have one – "We're saving them for the party" – or if you've promised not to have any – but the real sin there is dishonesty rather than greed. We tend to use the word temptation in this rather trivial sense. 'Those cream cakes look very tempting.' 'I was tempted to watch the late film, but I went to bed.'

The temptations Jesus underwent were of a wholly different, much more serious type. The word 'testing' is a much better translation. That's the word used in verse 13 at the end of the gospel reading; why they've used the word 'tempted' in verse 2 I don't know. It's the same Greek word, and I should have thought the translators would have been consistent. Some testing is of course carried out for a good cause. Youngsters doing the Duke of Edinburgh awards are trained in survival techniques and then spend a weekend in the wilds of Dartmoor or somewhere similar. The testing contributes to their learning and growth. Failure is not usually disastrous.

Jesus was tested by an evil power. Given his mission by God, anointed by the Spirit in baptism, testing was inevitable. Failure would have been disastrous. Right at the beginning of his ministry he encountered evil in its stark reality. It would return again in full force at the end of his life as the cross grew nearer. That was the opportune time when the devil returned to him. Jesus declared to those who arrested him, "This is your hour and the power of darkness."

Jesus was tested by the devil in the wilderness. Some people do not believe the devil exists. But they should not dismiss the meaning of this encounter that the gospels report. Are we not aware of a wilderness within ourselves, and an evil side to our nature? The rabbis taught that in each one of us there is an inclination to good and an inclination to evil. St. Paul contrasted the spirit and the flesh. And Freud used the categories of the super-ego (a bit like the conscience) and the id, where all our instincts and impulses swim around. It was not just an external experience for Jesus. Our

translation reads ‘he was led by the Spirit in the wilderness;’ it could also read ‘he was led in the spirit in the wilderness.’ Jesus’ conflict, like ours, was spiritual.

The first temptation or test was about turning stones into bread: very tempting for a hungry man. It highlights the place of self: the satisfaction of my needs, getting what I want. Later in his ministry, Jesus would not always do what people wanted for themselves. He fed the 5,000, and people followed him wanting a repeat of the miracle. Even the disciples didn’t bother bringing bread with them because they thought Jesus would supply it. Jesus refused to put self first, and so should his followers.

The second temptation was about worshipping the devil and gaining glorious authority over the kingdoms of the world. This highlights the place of power: my control over my own destiny and the lives of others. But Jesus taught about God’s kingdom, where the greatest were the little children, the poor were the blessed ones, and the first were last. We know how power can be abused in the world. It can also be abused in the church, which has often sought to control the lives of its members. Terms like power-evangelism are current. But God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

The third temptation was about Jesus flinging himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, in Jerusalem, so that the angels would catch him. There are several ways we could interpret this, one of which is the desire we often feel to hand over responsibility to someone else. But Jesus did not shirk responsibility in the face of opposition from foes and incomprehension from friends. His faithfulness led him to the cross, where he was lifted up at Jerusalem. When he had done all that he could, he commended his spirit into his Father’s care. How ready are we to take our proper responsibilities? Or, like another character in the passion accounts, are we all too ready to wash our hands of responsibility when the pressure’s on?

Issues of self, and power, and responsibility, are with us throughout our lives. They are bound up with our identity and our relationships. They are part of being human. Jesus’ response to the devil’s testing showed what faithful dependence on God required. There are times when we struggle; there are times when we fail. But Jesus did not fail. In him, our humanity has passed the test. As S. Paul wrote in our second reading, quoting the prophet Joel, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ In the wilderness Jesus fought the battle he would fight later on the cross, and won. His victory is ours.