

## LENT 1

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Matt. 4:1

In the Gospel according to St. Mark we are told that after Jesus was Baptised by John in the river Jordan, the first thing Jesus did was to go into the wilderness – driven by the Holy Spirit. There, he was tempted by Satan for forty days.

The other synoptic gospels give us much more detail about the nature of the temptations. In both Matthew and Luke there is a theological debate between Jesus and the devil. There are three temptations. First we have "If you are the Son of God" then demonstrate the fact by turning stones into bread. Secondly, "If you are the Son of God" then throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple. And thirdly, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and says "If it is power you want then worship me and I will give you all these kingdoms. And of course Jesus resists all three temptations.

This fairly straight forward debate is really a picture, painted in words, which depicts the internal conflicts and tensions which Jesus must have experienced in the time of preparation for his messianic mission. "If you are the Son of God" then how are you going to set about inaugurating his kingdom? What strategy are you going to adopt? What is God's will for you?

When we talk of temptations in our day to day living, and especially during Lent, we tend to think of fairly straight forward

things like resisting the inclinations we have to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh. We resolve to resist these temptations, at least during Lent. As a consequence we may lose weight which will be good for us and of course benefit spiritually as well. The temptations which are depicted in the gospels are of a fundamentally different order. These temptations are about making moral choices; not simply between a simple right or wrong action, but between our will and God's will.

When I was confirmed at the age of twelve or thirteen, I was given a little book which was called The Communicant's Manual. This booklet set out in fairly simple terms what you were expected to do as a communicant member of the church. It included a list of sins in the middle pages which was a useful reference if you ever wanted to make a private confession before a priest. If you couldn't think of any sins worth confessing, you could always find some there. Some of them, I hadn't even heard of, but they all looked worth a try. But of course the older you get, the more you realise that life is not as simple as that. Real temptation is filled with ambiguity and contradiction. Some times we like to behave as if it was a straight forward choice between red and blue - but we deceive ourselves. There are always muddy areas.

A few years ago a report was published by the civil service called the Scott Report. It was about the integrity of government ministers. Did they deceive parliament? Were they economical with the truth? Are they involved in sleaze? Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, I'm sure you'll agree that it is very easy to criticise others, and especially those who are involved in making

very delicate and complex decisions. It is of course dangerous to make such judgements. I wonder how each one of us if such a report was to be written about us.

So what can we say about the temptations faced by Jesus? The letter to the Hebrews asserts that Jesus is "one who in every respect was tempted as we are, yet without sin". If it was true that Jesus was tempted, then it must follow that he too struggled with the ambiguities and contradictions of life as we do. It must be true that he experienced agonies of torment of mind as we do. The experience of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane says it all. In his anguish he prayed even more earnestly, and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood; "nevertheless" he said, "let your will be done, not mine".

When we are faced with the many moral dilemmas which face us in our relationships, in our money matters, in medical ethics or in political life, we find that there are no easy answers. The serenity prayer which is used throughout the world by alcoholics anonymous can, I think, be a great help.

'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

**AMEN**