**#67 Dodford HC, Sunday 26 February 2023; Lent 1**

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

### 15The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

### 3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ 2The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but 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.”’ 4But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+2%3A15-17%2CGenesis+3%3A1-7&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-61a)] knowing good and evil.’ 6So when 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, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

### Matthew 4: 1-11

### The Temptation of Jesus

**4**Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2**He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. **3**The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ **4**But he answered, ‘It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
    but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

**5**Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6**saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
    and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’

**7**Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’

**8**Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; **9**and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ **10**Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
    and serve only him.”’

**11**Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Oscar Wilde famously said ‘I can resist anything except temptation.’ Mae West said ‘I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.’ Marie Lloyd agreed with Oscar and Mae, singing ‘A little of what you fancy does you good.’

Great one-liners, but these quotes show the problem of human nature; we are available for temptation. Fully human and not at all divine, in stark contrast to Jesus in Matthew 4. Perhaps the devil’s big error in Matthew was to approach Jesus in the wilderness.

I’d like to think that a wilderness experience might toughen me up a bit, like in those team building things that people go on. So by the time the devil shows up in *my* wilderness, I *might* have been able to grit my teeth, go into ‘just-get-through-this’ mode, and find it easier to resist his temptations. If I’ve just had a nice dinner and am watching a favourite episode of something in a recliner, then the devil might catch me unawares, and susceptible.

Anyway, we hear that after 40 days and nights, Jesus was famished. The first thing that the devil offers is…yes, you’ve guessed it, dinner. The devil, obviously quite a professional, has gone straight to the heart of where Jesus might be feeling a little thin. It’s the same technique that has worked before, in Eden, with Adam and Eve, so why not give it another try?

It might be a quick win, Lucifer thinks. Job done, back home in time for a review of the current Torment Policy. Approaching someone tired and famished, what better than some fresh bread? That smell, and the smell of ground coffee…

But, although a thorough professional, it seems the devil’s research on his victim hasn’t quite been up to scratch.

Temptation seeks out our weak points, the points where we might feel shame, points where we are vulnerable; that’s the devil’s technique here. But Jesus, as usual, questions the devil’s terms, and responds with another point of view; as always, he asks the questioner to think again; ‘Who do *they* say I am?….who do *you* say I am?,’ he asks, in Mark, for instance.

Yes, I have no doubt, with Jesus being fully human as well as fully divine, a crust of bread wouldn’t come amiss. But Jesus knows that the devil’s focus is wrong, that really, long term, you need something else; the nourishment of the love of God. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, also knew this message; ‘love hopes all things, endures all things…’

Lucifer - a professional, as we heard – isn’t phased by this first reversal. He has a backup plan. He then goes on to question Jesus’s faith; perhaps, years later, he will stand with Iscariot, and will hear that dark moment in Gethsemane when Jesus does seem to question his own faith, focusing on the local rather than the eternal and transcendent – ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ Perhaps Lucifer will then perceive a chink in the armour of faith – but by then he’s too late, and in any case, it’s an illusion. Back in the desert, Jesus similarly feels no temptation to ‘put the Lord your God to the test’.

I suspect that Satan might be just realising who he’s up against at this point, but he gives it another go. So he questions what it is that Jesus thinks is central to life. ‘Look at all this,’ he says, ‘if you worship me, all of this will be yours’. The devil is offering all of the temptations of the consumer society, offering faith as a transaction.

Jesus replies that Satan has his focus wrong again; the focus is on God, not on things. Perhaps, as an exploitative consumer, Satan should have bought a better camera, because his lens is faulty. Wrong question, Lucifer; wrong terms; wrong theology.

Satan’s offers are all about power and privilege, status and self-aggrandisement. Jesus’s answers are all about the fruits of the spirit; in these verses, Jesus shows how to live in love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

‘Against such things’, says Paul to the Galatians, ‘there is no law,’ so the devil is on a hiding to nothing, and he has been from the start. Perhaps he needs a word with his researchers.

Being tested happens when you stand up for God. This seems especially so in our society, where every aspect of our faith is questioned. Some theologians call this ‘fragilization’, where what you thought was true has become fragile through opposition, and through literalist re-evaluation; the virgin birth, anyone? The Resurrection? Ascension? Society asks, as Nicodemus asked, although from a different viewpoint, ‘Lord, how can these things be?’

They can be, and we know *they are*, through our faith.

As Christians we are open to temptations, but Jesus shows us a way forward; within our temptations, we are also strengthened, by each other, by our community of faith, our common understanding, varied though it is, of what it is to be Christian in the world.

In that shared faith and love, we can take heart; just before Jesus went into the wilderness, at the end of Matthew 3, Jesus’s baptism, he is assured by the spirit of God that “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” That love is with us all too.

And also there might be some small comfort in Joey Adams’s saying, as a companion to the one-liners we heard at the start; ‘Don’t worry about avoiding temptation,’ he said. ‘As you grow older it will avoid you.’

Amen