

*Lead us not into temptation*

It is such an odd line in the Lord's Prayer. Most of us will say it at least each week, many of us each day – or more than once a day. But what do we mean when we say it. What temptations are we avoiding, and are they the same temptations?

There are all those classic cartoons and movies where characters have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other – and the devil is always those temptations which are a mirror in some way to our soul. The thing about temptations is that they aren't necessarily shadows – rather they are often opportunities which bring out our worst rather than our best.

I was talking to one of the Community Police Officers recently who came to talk to me about the burglaries we have had in the building. I was pondering if they were planned. He reflected that most crime is opportunistic. He spoke of a robbery where a couple were sitting in a local café having lunch with their phone on the table. Another couple were sitting at the next table eating – while the first couple got up to speak to some others. In that moment, the others took their phone.

Due to all the tracking, police caught them on Kilburn High Road within the hour. When asked the thief said – I didn't go in planning it – it just seemed too easy – an opportunity I could take advantage of.

We may have lots of thoughts on this report – but I was struck by this idea that temptation is not like the appearing devil but rather an opportunity that presents itself.

In essence, this is one way to look at the story of Adam and Eve. A story modern liberals often avoid because it is hard to live with those who take the story literally. But it is a story within the biblical text for a reason. It highlights that from the beginning of time, when presented with opportunity for things to be easy or more powerful or more comfortable or even more exciting – there is a trait within humanity which is drawn to that path regardless of the moral, ethical and even personal implications.

But even that is a little simplistic, because as we know temptations or wrong decisions or even disobedience isn't always based on a false opportunity or bad choice.

Sometimes a temptation presents itself as a plausible opportunity. In the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, who is telling the truth – God or the Serpent? How do Adam and Eve process this?

*Old Testament Scholar Cameron Howard points out that The serpent promises that Eve and Adam will become "like gods, ones who know good and evil" (3:5).<sup>2</sup> This outcome is not immediately confirmed in the text; however, at Genesis 3:22, God declares that the humans have indeed become "like us, knowing good and evil," fuelling God's expulsion of the humans from the garden. Thus, the snake seems to have a lot of correct information about the garden's*

*trees and the consequences of eating from them -- information that God either did not know or did not reveal to the humans. The serpent's question to Eve is not exactly a lie, but in its craftiness the serpent does appear to be setting up these humans, or God, or both, for a confrontation.*<sup>1</sup>

In an era of 'fake news' we might want some straight forward answers about faith and how to live, or even what God has done and who God is - but if we are looking for definite facts - this story is a hard one to place. This is a difficult text, and it raises some difficult questions about our understanding of God and of evil; but commentators point out the key to this passage is in the literary value, and our understanding of *seeing and knowing*. This is not just in the eating of forbidden fruit, but in the conversations taking place, and the opportunities presented – the seeing and knowing of humanity change.

This is not a simple allegory about how sin entered the world. Nor is it the answer to why there is temptation. But it is the basis of an image which is used throughout the biblical text when we explore the tension between God and Humanity – and the broken relationships and broken covenants that follow. *The sin of Adam* is used through biblical literature to describe the resulting fracture between God and Humanity and the tensions in that relationship. Paul even uses this term when addressing the Romans. 'Because we are all like Adam we must take responsibility for our sin'. That is – we need to take responsibility for our choices and actions – whatever the opportunities which might be presented to us.

But what is the point of playing with the language of temptation and being made uncomfortable by the images of biblical literature? Well hopefully it helps us understand Christ more fully – and hopefully it helps to understand ourselves as well and who we are – our identity.

And to do that, we need to turn to our Gospel and the image of Jesus in the desert. Jesus enters the desert for 40 days – and too is presented with a series of opportunities on which he needs to make choices. The image of Satan comes to Jesus at the times when he is most vulnerable and presents him with opportunities and possibilities that would relieve his hardship. But it would not be a long term fix – it would only address Jesus immediate need. That is the trick of temptations isn't it, the opportunity presented looks to be a solution, a way out, from our current pain or context.

The temptations which are presented to Jesus, not unlike those presented to Adam and Eve, are about identity. Who are we in face of the opportunities that we are presented with in the world? Jesus is presented with a series of test which would allow him to demonstrate his power and even his sovereignty – but they would not bring an outcome for a world of justice and peace. But also, there is something about integrity within our identity which is at the heart of all the readings today. Of

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3183](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3183)

course good things, even clearer vision might come as a result of following a temptation, but it may not give us integrity or future. In an article David Lose wrote this week about this theme – he suggested it is like the old saying *You only know who you are when you realize whose you are.*<sup>2</sup> So often we think of identity as something we forge on our own, but most of our sense of ourselves comes from the community we belong to, our family of origin, and the people with whom we hang out, and is mostly about the choices we make as a result of this. Identity is not simply created.

So in the context of temptations, our identity is forged in the context of hope – hope for long term and positive outcomes that give us integrity and exhibit compassion.

Jesus' journey into the desert is very much about the defining of who he is. He is not lost, and he is not being punished for something he has done wrong – an assumption that people sometimes make about their own "wilderness experiences"). Jesus has been led by the Holy Spirit for a purpose: to be tempted or tested by the devil.<sup>3</sup> The debates he encounters with the devil prove his readiness for the mission entrusted to him. He has the credentials and the authority for this mission, as Matthew is so eager to point out. Now, through this wilderness test, Jesus stands squarely in the long history of the people of God, even as his encounter with the devil points ahead to a future as yet unfolding before him. He is ready for all that will come as he begins to preach the kingdom of God.

Our Lenten journey then, can likewise not be a sparse desert or wilderness experience that feels like a punishment – but rather an experience that helps us understand better who we are and to prepare us more fully for the daily temptations and opportunities which are placed before us. A time to reflect, consider, shape ourselves, more and more into the likeness of Christ.

The Lenten framework we choose should help us with this – it shouldn't be a burden – rather something which allows us to see more clearly both ourselves and those who would be our tempters.

The 40 bags in 40 day challenge could be part of this. What things, like Adam and Eve, like the Romans, and even like Jesus before us – do we need to let go of so that we can really see who we are in the light of God. Are there things which constantly offer temptation for us that we need to let go of for good so that we can be more fully ourselves.

However we find ourselves this Lent, whatever opportunities are presented to us – may we have the courage to be led away from temptations, and to more fully embrace our own identity in Christ. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/lent-1-a-identity-as-gift-and-promise/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3174](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3174)