

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

First Sunday in Lent

Lent is a time of grace, when we reflect on our temptations and our humanity, as well as on the creative and renewing power of God. As our liturgical life and Lenten practice invite us to pare back during this season, we consider what in our lives we want to strip back, or face, what are our real priorities, and are they set right? Do we need a new alignment in order to see things as they really are?

This poem by Jean Watt called *Lent* celebrates that cold space where trees and bushes are still bare, linking it to the practice of abstinence, of stripping down to the basics.

*Lent is a tree without blossom, without leaf,
Barer than blackthorn in its winter sleep,
All adorned. Unlike Christmas which decrees
The setting up, the dressing up of trees,
Lent is a taking down, a stripping bare,
A starkness after all has been withdrawn
Of surplus and superfluous,
Leaving no hiding place, only emptiness
Between black branches, a most precious space
Before the leaf, before the time of flowers;
Lest we should see only the leaf, the flower.
Lest we should miss the stars.*

Lent is a time to engage with what really matters. It is a time to engage with the dark places in our lives, to face them within ourselves, to understand them and, with the help of God, to turn from them. Not to beat ourselves up with guilt but to better understand who we are, as beloved children of God. Lent is a penitential season, and it was in the wilderness where Jesus faced who he was. Lent for us is an opportunity to

face who we really are and to discern the voices around us, discern how to use our potential, to examine our motivations, and uncover the desires which lie beneath the surface. Then find the freedom from the control that our temptations have over us, be that fears or insecurities, flaws or desires, whatever they are for the amendment of life and a new beginning.

A liberal reading of Genesis re-defines the role of the snake in the garden of Eden. Rather than being the face of evil, the snake offers Adam and Eve a choice, the freedom to make their own decisions for good or for bad. A way out of the controlled environment of paradise, to seek their own destiny in the real world where there is birth and death and complexity.

In Genesis, Eve is the protagonist, the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, keen to taste the forbidden fruit. Adam was present too, he did not resist and co-operated freely. They test the limits of the rules, and the consequences mean the inevitable move away from a safe and protected order to become quintessentially human, to experience the difficulties of navigating a changing world.

In paradise, creation is teeming with life and well-provisioned, there are relationships of innocence. The movement away from this Eden brings us to a world that we know well, a life of hard work, social roles, where discernment matters and we grapple with the many layers that distinguish good from evil. But I don't want to dismiss what the snake represents. Yes, Eve and Adam made their own choice to disobey God, but they were deceived, and subtly deceived.

Perhaps a temptation we know well is to try to put a face on evil, to visualise it, to name it as a creature, or a people, to point the finger and separate it from ourselves. Movies and media captivate us by doing this. Another response is to engage with evil and fight it, as an opponent in battle. However, evil has no face, and at the heart of darkness is an evil that is unrecognisable, yet it lurks closer than we imagine. Like Adam and Eve, we have a relationship both with good and with evil.

To be tempted is to be human, and if we are alive then the chances are, we will be tempted. After all, even Jesus was tempted. Temptations are in the trappings of life, they have the potential to be nice, and rewarding, and if they weren't appealing then they wouldn't be temptations. They are also in the mundane, and lurk in the recesses of our lives and souls.

The scene of Jesus' temptation stands between his Baptism and his ministry. The gospel writer of Matthew is telling us something about who Jesus is. At his baptism God makes a public announcement about his identity: *this is my son in whom I am well pleased.*

The temptations of Jesus tell us about the type of ministry he will lead. No, he won't be turning all our stones into bread, the nourishment he offers is a spiritual one. No, he won't be making a grand spectacle by throwing himself off a temple only to be caught by a host of angels, and the power that he is given will not be used for political purposes, to gain all the Kingdoms of the world in exchange for devil worship. By not succumbing to these temptations, Jesus accepts who he is, the power that he has, and chooses to use it for good, for grace and for love.

Twice the devil question Jesus like this: *If thou be the Son of God.* These same words are used to taunt him when he is hung upon the cross: *If thou be the Son of God.* This strikes at the heart of his identity and character, is Jesus the son of God? If so, what does that mean he will do with his power?

Jesus faces challenges that invite him to take an easier path. This is clever manipulation, but the voice of the devil is just that, a voice, there is no power to act, only whisperings and cunning lies. Jesus responds by not acting, he does not take himself down from the cross. He puts his trust in God alone, and so we learn about the character of Jesus, he too is to be trusted. Jesus is persistent in subjecting himself to the will of God and to God's grace, he doesn't act in his own interest, he is committed and this

frees him to reject the enticing alternatives. In this image of Christ, we are invited to consider what it means to be faithful in our own lives.

The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. We have a relationship with the natural world, we always have. The stones, the bread, the cross that Jesus is nailed to are physical and material objects. This is the world that we live in. A world where creation needs tending, physical bodies need food, and possessions have a purpose. Therefore, the choices that we make matter, they will have consequences, and we thank God for the freedom to make these choices.

This Lenten season as we reflect on our temptations and on the grace of God in his creative and renewing power, may we seek the voice of Jesus. May our hearts be re-aligned, lest we should miss the stars, and gently lay down those things which hinder our journey to worship our maker.

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Genesis 2.15 – 17, 3. 1 – 7; Matthew 4. 1 - 11