

“Temptation and the Path to Maturity”

(Matthew 4.1-11)

Grant Bullen

Adam, Eve and the Apple (Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7)

As children we were taught to read the Adam and Eve story as a failure... a disaster... *paradise lost!* It was called *The Fall*... for at the beginning, (so this reading goes), humanity was perfect, but through this first act of sinful disobedience – eating the forbidden fruit – we became lesser, diminished people. We *fell* into an impaired corrupted version of who God intended us to be.

But that’s not the only way that Jews and Christians have read this story.

We *can* read it as a necessary movement *forwards* (rather than a *fall*)... beginning the journey from unformed *innocence* to fully developed *maturity*. Adam and Eve were *innocent* – that is, their eyes were not yet open to the complex reality of life... the choice between good and evil.

But they were not *perfect*... rather they were unformed... immature.

In the same way we might speak of young children with lots of growing and learning ahead of them – they’re beautiful but they’re not *complete* yet. They can’t stay as children. To be whole and fulfilled they need to grow, in and through the often-difficult challenges of adulthood.

That’s what we can see with Adam and Eve. Only experience – living life that is not idyllic but rather a mix of good and evil, joy and suffering... with that constant wrestle to choose the right path... only *this* imperfect conflicted life, can bring us to the true humanity God created us to be.

It’s a journey begun with ‘Adam and Eve’ (who symbolise the first humans), which we continue today, as we, slowly and sometimes-torturously, grow into the full beauty of humanity seen in Christ.

From the moment Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, their eyes are opened – they see reality without its idyllic guise... they see evil as well as good... (they recognise that they’re naked). And now they need to find their way through it.

They need to leave the perfection of paradise in order to grow up. Yes, it’s going to be a terrible struggle... a path with significant suffering... but they need to walk it.

Eating the 'apple' is sinful disobedience... but it's also necessary. It was always going to happen.

The Temptations of Christ

This reading connects us with how the Gospels present the Temptations of Jesus... the gospel that always begins the Sundays of Lent.

It is the Spirit who takes Jesus into the desert, *in order* that he may be tested. It is necessary for Christ to journey through the wrestle-with-temptation, to experience in himself the struggle between good and evil, in order that he may be faithful to his calling as the Son of Man... the Human One... that truly radiant humanity we saw in the Transfiguration last Sunday. He needs to journey *through* temptation.

We are being taught that the same is true for us... Temptation is not a failure, not a sign of some terrible inner corruption, but rather an experience of struggle and choice... that we *need* to go through.

The Nature and Essence of Temptation

So, what is the nature and essence of temptation? (We need to move beyond our childish definition of 'thinking about doing naughty things'... for there are much bigger stakes at play here.)

In the Jesus-story, temptation is focused on three actions – turning stones into bread; jumping off the pinnacle of the temple; and selling his soul in order to rule the world. But's what's behind them?

Well... they are all temptations to *power and control*.

(Repeat)

While the specific *nature* of temptation will be different for each one of us... the *essence*... the desire/need that fuels and drives them... is universal... the same for all of us.

The Adam and Eve story makes this starkly clear. In tempting the ‘first woman’ with the apple, The Serpent (the original Tempter) says, ‘*Eat this... and you’ll be like God. You’ll be the one in charge and you can order life to be exactly as you want it.*’ The essence of all temptation is to want to assume the role of God – to have things the way we want them... not to accept them as they are.

And so for Jesus in today’s gospel... He’s tempted to:

- use magic to end the poverty of his people; (*stones into bread*)
- to compel people to believe by a public demonstration of his power; (*throw yourself from the tower*)
- to rule all the nations of the world; (*you can do whatever you want*)

Instead of living in the world as it is – with all its limitation, frustration and suffering, the Tempter says to Jesus, ‘*You can make it exactly the way you think it should be!*’

And that’s the essence of the temptation we experience... It preys on our desire to have life on our own terms... just the way we think it should be... according to our wants, needs, perceptions. All temptation is to control... It whispers, ‘*Exert your power and influence and make it happen according to your will... just the way you want it.*’

The Way Through

Temptation *is* an ugly business. But it’s not a sign of failure or corruption. It is an inevitable part of the human experience. And it is necessary – we need to struggle with choice and discernment in order to grow up.

But to be fully alive we need to journey *through* it.

To give-in to temptation leads to ever more pain, suffering and blockage.

To be blind to it, to be unaware of its power and presence, is to allow it to rule us, and to do great damage to ourselves and others.

Simply put... we need to recognise temptation and say NO to it.

Christ is our model and guide... Despite the wiles of the Tempter – (who even quotes Scripture as his source) – Christ recognises these proposals for what they are... temptation to exert his will over God's.

Christ says No... each time saying that he will not put aside his total trust in God. It's what we'll hear again in the Garden of Gethsemane at the end of the story – *'Not my will, God... but yours. Not my way, but yours.'*

To eschew temptation is to stay faithful to God... to surrender our desire for control... and to say instead. *'I will trust you God, whatever comes.'*