

A sermon preached on the

First Sunday in Lent

1 March 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Brother Howard**

Little Brothers of Francis

Lection: Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

+. In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

I bring you warm greetings from Brother Wayne and Brother Geoffrey to all the saints in Christchurch. They wish you a holy and constructive preparation for the great feast of Easter.

The reading from Luke's Gospel tells of how Jesus was driven into the desert by the spirit of God, where he fasted forty days. This was a time of preparation for Jesus' ministry, and the forty days has given us the structure for Lent – a time of preparation for recalling the events of the Passion and the remarkable mystery of the feast of Easter. This time of preparation provides us, as Disciples of Christ, with several challenges. In my sermon for Ash Wednesday, I spoke of some of the ways we could review our practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. This morning's readings give us some structures for looking at issues of temptation as part of our Lenten review.

The context of the Lucan story in today's Gospel is the baptism of the Lord at John's hands, an event marked by the descent of the Spirit of God upon Him. It is this same Spirit that drives him into the desert. The Spirit empowers Jesus in his confrontation with the temptations of the devil. The devil tried to deflect Jesus from his obedience to the Father and to deflect him from his messianic task. In a sense the test for Jesus was to overcome the evil one and free Him to exercise the ministry he was called to. This period of testing has at its background the forty years of testing in the desert experienced by the Hebrew people in the wilderness of Sinai. Jesus responded to the three temptations with phrases taken from Deuteronomy 6-8; they can be summarised thus:

1. Bread may be the stuff of life, but whether human beings live or die is in the hands of God. Dt 8.3
2. Worship and service belong to God alone. Dt 6.13
3. When Satan challenges Jesus throw himself from the high point of the temple, a scriptural challenge taken from Psalm 91, Jesus retorted, "You must not put the Lord your God to the test." Dt 6.16

In these interchanges with the devil, Jesus placed his cause in His Father's hands, avoiding an ignominious pact with the devil. It was a course that would take him to the cross.

The story has an important teaching function for the Christian community, who can find encouragement in it when they in turn face temptation. Jesus' reply to the devil's enticements with passages of scripture is exemplary. It is in scripture that we can find the ammunition to deal with temptation.

It is important to bear in mind that Jesus was tempted on other occasions, significantly on the night of his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Gethsemane, Jesus grappled with the nature of the messianic task to which he was called, and in the face of the temptation to let the cup of suffering pass from him, he spent the time in the presence of His Father in prayer. Fortified by divine help he is enabled to face the final act of this cosmic drama. In a sense these temptation stories are like bookends to Jesus' ministry.

We too, are tempted. Perhaps our temptations do not seem quite like those experienced by Our Lord in the desert nor in the Garden of Gethsemane. But like Christ's experience, temptations to sin do draw us away from God. Maybe we do not understand Satan or the Devil to be the personification of Evil, but sin and temptations to sin are, nevertheless a daily reality for most of us.

Not so long ago I picked up a card in shop with a picture of a luscious looking chocolate cake on the front. Inside was a message that said something like the best way to deal with temptation is to give in! Smart, but I think, glib! It may be worth our while to reflect for a moment about what temptations really are. They are not something simply benign, and become a problem when we succumb, like eating chocolate cake. Temptations threaten to separate us from God, not just to fail our dietary aspirations.

For simplicity's sake we can think of sins in terms of the seven deadly ones: pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. We never sin alone. Pride involves our comparison with someone else. Covetousness is of something someone else has. Lusting after someone or something involves others in our temptation. Envy is of something someone else has. Gluttony deprives others of what is rightfully theirs. Anger is generally directed to others, not ourselves. Sloth or laziness shifts a burden onto others of what we are not doing. All our sins affect God or our neighbour or both, and represent a breakdown in those relationships. But significantly, they all negatively affect us. Sin undermines our discipleship of Christ like termites eating away the foundation of a timber building. Temptation puts us on the route to sin. Rooting out sin means we must address the problem of temptation.

Perhaps the most insidious temptations to sin are provided by advertising. A great deal we see on billboards is directed to the seven deadly sins. Recently I was in Brisbane, and there were huge advertisements with the question in huge letters; Want longer lasting sex? It directed the reader to a so-called medical service which would help us indulge! From my perspective, this advertising hoarding was directed toward lust, one of the seven deadly sins. Another big billboard advertised penthouse suites in a yet-to-be-completed high-rise building in Surfer's Paradise. The advertisement pictured an opulent apartment that pandered to pride, covetousness and envy. How often do advertisements for food represent gluttony? Generally, I would argue that temptations arise from external stimuli, and consumer society is structured around creating and supplying us with things we mostly do not need. We live in the midst of a paradise of temptation, often subtly directed to our dark side. In one of my talks yesterday I pointed out that it can be difficult to distinguish good from evil – they can often appear so alike. It is easy to think that something that appears good is good, but really is not. Amma Syncretica in the fourth century noted that the devil was very good at mimicking the virtues and St Antony of Egypt's teaching on discernment centred on distinguishing what was and what was not of God.

There is an ancient saying that a monk out of his monastery is like a fish out of water. Wherever I go I realise how hard it is for us to be strong in our Christian principles. At home I never watch television. We do not have a TV. So when I am staying with friends, I am regularly astounded by what comes on the TV. The seven deadly sins seem to be no longer sins, but what people do every day of their lives. Reality TV, advertisements and soapies have undermined the ethical fabric of western civilisation. Gluttony, anger, sloth, pride are all there in abundance. This constant diet of intemperance in its various forms weakens our perceptions of what constitutes sin. It is when I get home that I begin to realise the significance of that saying about the monk. Away from home I am only too fully aware of the problem of distinguishing between the good and what is evil.

Having had our appetites stimulated by temptation, how do we respond? Our responses to temptation come out of our internal guides, our consciences and at the centre of the issue is the health of our conscience. Do we have the ability to discern what a temptation to sin is? How do we appropriately respond to those external stimuli to temptation? One aspect of Christian discipleship is to build up an effective values-system derived from the teaching of Our Lord. Throughout the Gospels there are stories and parables that provide us with all we need to direct our lives. There are warnings against pride and recommendations to humility; the encouragement of charity and kindness in opposition to hard-heartedness; exhortations to generosity in contrast to meanness; to avoid passing judgement; and much more besides. We can only build up this armoury against temptation if the teaching of our Lord becomes an integral part of who we are. This happens when we spend the time to become thoroughly familiar with His teaching and then appropriate it to ourselves. There is a saying that we become what we eat. If we feed at the table of the Gospels, they can in turn form us and our lives can become more and more Christ-like.

It is hard to place ourselves out of temptations way; to reduce the external stimuli that feed temptation. Billboards, advertising, television and the internet are integral parts of our lifestyle and we cannot avoid them altogether; nor can we avoid people whose lives and values are not our own, or situations in which we may feel compromised. We simply cannot separate ourselves, cocoon ourselves, or inoculate ourselves from the temptations we face. Jesus faced temptations, discerned their origins and fought them off. By developing the gift of discernment, the ability to identify spiritual danger for what it is, we can reject the temptation before it harms us. But even then, in the end, when we do 'fall' - when we realise we have made a mistake – we do not despair, but repent, seek forgiveness and move on. I think it was Abba Poemen who said we can make a new start every day – every moment.

That Jesus fought with temptation gives us the courage to do so too. To recognise spiritual danger and withstand it – or walk away from it is about maintaining our ethical integrity, and cleaving to the good. To others it may seem like clinging to old-fashioned values, but just because something is old-fashioned does not mean is wrong; nor does it mean it is not good. From my point of view the Gospel of Christ and the example of his life have enduring value in every age and every culture. They rarely fail to give me encouragement in my times of need.