

Lent 1 Year A 2017 Stewardship

In the name of....

A teacher asked her class of young children to make a drawing of the Old Testament story they liked best. One boy depicted a man in a top hat driving an old car. In the back seat were two passengers, both scantily dressed.

'It's nice picture', said the teacher, 'but what does the story tell?' The young artist seemed surprised at the question. 'Well', he exclaimed, 'doesn't it say in the Bible that God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden?'

The story of Adam and Eve succumbing to temptation and the story of the tempting of Jesus, are two very sophisticated stories. They are essentially about making choices.

Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the one forbidden tree. Naturally, like all children, that was the tree they wanted to sample. They knew it would give them the knowledge of good and evil.

What they didn't know was that that knowledge would mean that from then on they would have to accept being responsible. They would have to accept the need to make hard choices. Being responsible is hard.

What the story is saying is that right from the beginning of human history we have been tempted to make wrong choices. Irresponsible, selfish ones. Ones that cause pain to other people and also to ourselves.

It is only a story but behind it is a fact of human experience. We find it easier to take a short cut and also to do things that we know are bad for us and harmful. We think that, just this once, we can get away with it.

There are all sorts of things that can tempt us.

Being **Jealous** tempts us not to give others the praise and credit they deserve. **Fear** tempts us never to take even the smallest risk that could enlarge our horizon.

Pride tempts us to think too highly of ourselves. To think that the world revolves round us.

As we reflect on our Planned Giving we face temptations; we may be tempted to think our contribution won't really make a difference; that, I give my time and talents instead; that the church has plenty of money, or that church isn't the place to talk about money.

Temptation is a fact of life and so it was natural for Jesus to be tempted. Tempted right at the beginning of his ministry. He had, after all, given up the glory of being divine and emptied himself to become like us, human.

Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. To take a short cut to solve the world's food problems at a stroke. But he knew he had rather to change human nature.

Jesus was very hungry but was not tempted to satisfy his desire, but for what reason? Jesus does this to strengthen his focus on God. 'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

While giving up chocolate or alcohol might be good for physical health it is not the main focus. Lent invites us to make space in our lives, and provides an opportunity, to focus more on God. Lent can be a time to read the Bible regularly, to make time to prayer whether privately or through one of our services during the week.

In the third temptation the devil suggests what we would call today an alternative fact - Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world, which are offered to him in exchange for worship. Jesus, as he prepared to embark on his public ministry could have much more easily taught and influenced the world from this place but instead again said no, confirming the need to worship God and only God.

Unlike Adam, Jesus resists temptation, and goes onto live a ministry that helped people, changed people, brought them life and changed the world. All through history people have been changed by Jesus.

Following his temptations Jesus set about choosing and training a group of followers. The twelve followed and learnt from him;

They helped people. They brought the sick to Jesus. They helped 5000 people to have enough food for the day. They saw the madman among the tombs cured. They saw Zacchaeus the dishonest tax-collector reformed.

(Two remarkable things happen to Zacchaeus in response to Jesus' presence. He pledges to give half his wealth to the poor. Such generosity comes from a sense of being accepted, forgiven, welcomed. It far exceeds the requirement of the tithe which was 10% and it helps Zacchaeus rebuild his relationship with God's people. Secondly, he promises to repay those he has defrauded far in excess of what the law required. The extravagant grace of Jesus invites an extravagant response.)

(A story is told that, while walking at Balmoral, Queen Victoria got caught in the rain. Calling at a cottage, she was grudgingly offered a tatty umbrella. She went on her way and the next day a courtier in a splendid coach returned the umbrella. As the courtier left, he heard the owner say, 'If I had known who she was, she could have had my best umbrella'.

There is a story of Jesus sat in the Temple and observing the giving of the rich and poor. Some things never change. Just as today, those who have money give more in cash terms than those on lower incomes. And when they give, those on lower incomes give more in proportion to their income than those with more money. The story is called the widow's mite. The gifts of the wealthy that Jesus observed were big gifts, but his attention was drawn to the giving of a poor widow who in percentage terms gave far more.

It is easy to miss the point of this story. The heart matters to God, but there is more. It is not that she gave the last that she had to give but that she gave the best she had to give.

Last week Jun asked us in his sermon to reflect on what we really think of as our priorities, what really matters. He spoke about the significance of our relationship with God, creation and each other. And that just like other relationships, the relationship we have with money affects greatly who we are and what our values are.

At this time as each of us considers our giving – the issue is not actually how much we give - yes of course, we as an organization have bills to pay and hope that we can fulfil our vision.

The far deeper question is: how much of me and the life God has given to me, is truly reflected in the gift I give?

(If we can see the difference that our ministry as God's people in this place can make in people's lives, rather than bills, then whether we have much or little, we should give 'our first fruits', our first and best not what is left over

Today, our call is to live a Holy Lent, beyond fasting and abstinence, to embracing the truths that will set us and our churches free to live out the fullness of God's mission. May we all seek to find the self-denials that will strengthen our focus on God.

And today, everyone who is here – together - are invited to review the level of our giving to All Saints to help us to continue to grow and make a difference in peoples' lives. May we continue discerning God's will together and walking together along the road to growth and to effective service of our Lord.

Last Sunday was the third anniversary of my licensing as your parish priest. I have commented before how struck I have been by the Spirit of welcome here. I have also been particularly struck by all the selfless generosity and I see in all that is done to support our common life; I see it in so many different ways. I do say Thank You to all of you for that.

Today, Please take your envelope home – pray about it – think about it – reflect carefully , then see whether how you can rise to the challenge of playing your part in building our future so that we can more and more be a parish church which thrives, and can reach out to accomplish the Vision that we have been discerning and building together

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet without sin: give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness, so may we know your power to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,