

Year C Lent 1

Deut 26:1-11

Romans 10: 8b-13

Luke 4: 1-13

The three temptations of Christ when he withdrew to the wilderness to meditate, pray and seek to discern how he was to live out his life of mission and ministry, speak powerfully into this time and space.

They speak of the allure of power, the allure of projecting our ego, the allure of thinking we are as powerful as God and can act purely for our own interests. These temptations also open up the very real possibility that we can fool ourselves some of the time, or maybe most of the time, that the decisions we make are for the benefit of others, are altruistic in nature, when in fact they serve our purposes.

These temptations shine a light in to the inner dialogues of so many of our minds, as we make decisions that seem innocuous but can lead us into a downward spiral, or down paths that we then find hard to extricate ourselves from whilst maintaining some semblance of self-respect.

Jesus had withdrawn into the wilderness. He chose to pray and fast, a common pairing at a time of focussed discernment. Jesus was no doubt aware of the dangers that he would personally face, and the likely consequences of starting and maintaining such a ministry. All those doubts and the thinking through of likely outcomes would have consumed his mind over the days and nights alone in the wilderness.

It is no wonder that he was tempted. His divine mission was in direct opposition to all that was wrong in the world, and yet, he could have chosen to take a different path. He was assailed by the devil, Satan or the 'accuser', depending on what translation we read. In Jewish thought Satan was either thought of a member of the holy court whose role it is to test the righteous or was thought of as an evil being who opposes God.

In those forty days the righteous disposition of Jesus was tested. It was as if he had been through the refiner's fire and came out the stronger for his time in the wilderness battling with the temptations placed before him. Jesus

remained obedient to God and chose to fashion his ministry as God intended. Jesus could have abandoned his wilderness retreat at any moment he wanted. He didn't. He stayed with it. He struggled through his time of self-examination and learnt what the wilderness had to teach him, and as a result was able to walk a path of love, healing and forgiveness right to the cross.

This passage reminds us that we each will be assailed by temptations. Although we are one of God's beloved children, we are not immune to being open to temptations. In looking to Jesus' experience in the wilderness we can see that he was beloved and yet suffered hunger, he was God's precious son yet felt so vulnerable, and was not protected from the trials and tribulations of a human life. So, if Jesus was tempted, if Jesus faced these tests and times of suffering, we can expect them too.

As humans we can be too quick to deny the struggle, to believe we should never have such times in our lives. We can believe that in our lives we should never be assailed by crises, by temptations, by suffering, that our lives will be one happy journey from start to finish. And when we do experience a difficult time, we want to leave it behind as quickly as possible, rather than work out what it may be teaching us.

One of my most meaningful experiences was of sitting in a meditation session and hearing 'stick with it'. Nothing more, just 'stick with it'. I puzzled over this, but a week or two later, on reading a passage by Richard Rohr about suffering, he used that phrase, describing how we learn, grow and mature when we don't deny our suffering, and rather than flee from it, to reflect and learn from it, knowing God is the guide in the learning, that God helps us redeem the struggle and our painful experiences.

In our news stories just now, we see a clear example of temptation. An all-powerful dictator has listened to alluring and siren voices, and has definitely not paid any attention to the counter message of God's love, compassion, grace and mercy. I am sure God's voice was there to be heard, but was dismissed. The paths of good and evil were laid out, and it is clear what path was chosen. That choice has already led to the deaths of so many innocent people; conscripts in the Russian Army as well as defence forces in Ukraine and many of the civilian population. Many hundreds of thousands more have been traumatised, have hidden from bombardments and fled as refugees to neighbouring countries.

In undertaking the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, one exercise was to consider what small acts devoid of good can be the start of an unintentional spiral of evil. Was the forced placement of Russians into other Soviet countries in the days of the USSR the real precursor? Was the understandable, but not acceptable, discrimination of Russian speakers in those countries after the fall of the USSR a contributory factor?

We will not truly know, although they have been part of the excuse for the previous annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, prior to the current invasion.

Those who have chosen love, not hate, have their own difficult choices to make. I can understand why Ukrainians may wish to remain and fight the aggressor, whilst knowing the risks of being killed. I can understand why Ukrainians have chosen to leave their country, to give their children a chance of a better future, hopefully including a return to Ukraine at some point in the future.

And how do we respond in this situation? Do we choose love and hope? What does it look like?

I'd suggest it includes, firstly, prayer. Prayer may not change Putin's mind, but it may bring us to a place of understanding about the situation, and make clear what else we can do, challenging our perspectives and our complacency.

Secondly, we can show our love by donating money to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. Collecting 'stuff' isn't going to help at this time; so much has been collected and is being taken to the refugees that there are real issues about how to store, work out what has been donated, and distribute it.

Thirdly, we can be active in ensuring our government opens up rapid routes and processes for enabling refugees to enter the country, and then to offer practical support for any who find themselves living in our region.

And lastly, despite the gloom and the news reports, look at all the people and nations who oppose this war, look at the many small individual actions taking place that reject the notion of war and wish to promote, peace, love and understanding between nations.

Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness.

When we are tempted, let us remember those things, as Micah reminded us; to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. When we walk humbly with our God we shall never use our power or position to do harm.

Let us pray, as I say the universal prayer for peace.

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth.

Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust.

Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace.

Let peace fill our lives, our world, our universe.

Peace, peace, peace.