

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

First Sunday in Lent

5th March 2017

Readings: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5: 12-21; Matthew 4: 1-11.

'Temptations in the Desert'

Lead us Not into Temptation

A quote from Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, goes:

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also."

(Lord Henry Wotton to Dorian Gray)

Of course, these are not Oscar Wilde's own words, but rather are those of one of the characters in his book. Yet, unsurprisingly for Wilde, the storyline of his only novel and its ideas were very controversial at the time. The theme of this work is the moral decadence that comes from living a double-life based of self-indulgence without moral restriction. It is not a defence of such decadence. While the quotation is seemingly witty in its approach to temptation, the plot of the book does not support this proposition.

Nevertheless, I am intrigued by the suggested role of the brain in 'leading us into temptation'. For what may be a temptation to one person may well be of no importance to another. In other words, a temptation arises from within ourselves – we create it and subsequently struggle with it. Consequently, there is no point in saying 'the devil made me do it' when it is we who choose to act destructively on our temptations!

The Desert of Discovery

Today's gospel reading presents us with Jesus retreating to the desert and there struggling with his temptations - first he is challenged to meet his physical needs; secondly to test God's faithfulness; and finally, to seek wealth, power and status.

The idea of the ‘temptation of Jesus’ can be a bit problematic in some religious circles where Jesus’ humanity is down-played and his divinity over-emphasised. Nevertheless, as the Lenten Preface for the Eucharist states: ‘he was tempted in every way as we are yet he did not sin’.

It is comforting to remember that the experience of temptation is not, of itself, a sin. Indeed, temptation is part of the human condition – and, moreover, it is possible that on occasions we might be tempted to do good things! Nevertheless, if Jesus was truly tempted as we are, it then follows that he, too, had doubts and was tempted by desires for power, wealth, security, sex, and fame. To act, or not to act on the things that tempt us; that is the question.

The good news here is that the experience of temptation is not foreign to God and we may seek spiritual power to help manage the temptations that can bring destructive elements into our lives.

The spiritual journey, or pilgrimage, has often led people into the desert to find solitude for the purpose of meditation and introspection on the one hand; but it is also for an encounter with God on the other. A reason for this is to remove oneself from the distractions that prevent us from seeing clearly the nature of our lives and the good health, or otherwise, of our spiritual being. We continue this practice today through retreats and designated seasons for prayer and fasting, (such as Lent), as well as the disciplines of daily prayer and meditation.

Following his baptism, Jesus is described as going to the wilderness for forty days in preparation for his ministry. The temptations emerged from that preparation. Good preparation for any venture requires us to know ourselves and test our capabilities. Through this we determine those things that are in good shape and those things that weak or need to change. Such preparation happens in sport, in the military, in trades, the professions, and in the arts. In the case of the spiritual journey part of the preparation is the initial acknowledgement of our need for God – this is the recognition of our being ‘poor in spirit’.

The Last Temptation

As with Jesus, we can often be tempted during times of increased spiritual awareness. Moreover, such temptations often seem to be good and reasonable things to do. Why shouldn’t we feed ourselves when hungry, or seek safety if troubled, and what is intrinsically wrong with wealth and power? Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these things. What is often wrong with a temptation is the underlying motivation for taking the action, rather than the act itself; although some actions are clearly wrong.

In the play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T S Eliot has Archbishop Thomas a'Beckett (whose life is under threat from the king), facing four temptations:

1. The desire for physical safety,
2. The offer of power, wealth and fame,
3. The possibility of a political settlement with the king's enemies, and finally
4. The prospect of martyrdom, by which he would ultimately have spiritual power over the king.

The encounter with the first three tempters presents the audience with a meditation between Archbishop Thomas and his past demons, which he has already overcome. They are material, he knows them, he expects them, and is ready to respond. The fourth tempter, however, is not expected bringing what lies at Thomas' heart, which is the desire for spiritual power over the king through martyrdom.

Finally, realising the personal pride that lies behind his desire for martyrdom (an action brought about by himself rather than by God), he steps back from the temptation, saying:

*"The last temptation is the greatest treason:
to do the right thing for the wrong reason."*

Which is a truism for leaders in all ages and circumstances.

The Pilgrimage

Last Wednesday we began our journey through Lent toward Easter. We received the ashes as signs of penitence and humility as we entered this time of reflection and preparation. Through this, we hope to know ourselves and God's presence better. We are therefore challenged to look at our own lives, and in so doing, find a place of solitude where we can come to know ourselves better.

Without such prayer and meditation, we cannot hope to understand ourselves spiritually. Reflection helps us to gain a larger perspective on life and helps us to see the hand of God. To be sure, our lives are often too cluttered with activity, noise and haste - and reflection is therefore not easy. Nevertheless, the season of Lent encourages us to seek opportunities of solitude, by which we may face the desert of our own souls and seek God's grace and strength to become the people we are meant to be.

The desert experience is about facing up to reality with courage and hope. If we have been living shallow and indifferent lives, then let us turn to God, that we might, metaphorically, die to self and live for God and others.