

Sermon for the first Sunday of Lent

Rev David Howells

Grace Church in Scarborough

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(“I can resist anything but....”) **Temptation**

As Lent begins we tell the story of Jesus’ life as the One, the Christ of God beginning. And as soon as it begins Jesus is thrown into temptations. The story has it set up with Jesus and the Bad Guy having a conversation. I think that is a way of telling the story in images, but the story was actually more complicated and much more of an internal spiritual battle than the chit-chat of the Gospel’s representation. (If you are worried about me disrespecting the Gospel, I will come back to that in a while)

At the Annual Vestry Meeting I asked people to think about our Church arriving at 700 Kennedy Road. What do you fear about that? What do you hope for? And what do you think God hopes for? We know we are God’s Church, or a piece of it. We know we are called to be his people. We know a new future lies before us, different from our past but unknown, really.

What do you fear? We fear our great hopes, our beliefs in God’s leading, the Bishop’s plan.... We fear all these going wrong. We fear the loss of old members and traditional ways. Will we be able to grow in such a difficult area of town? Can we stretch from who and what we are to reach as far as others will need? And what if we just lose our nerve and stay still?

Now turn to Jesus. He had been baptized and heard God say, “You are my beloved child. I am so pleased with you!” And then he just knew he had to go forward. For a long time Jesus was alone in the wilds. Thinking, praying, imagining the future, wondering about the things he could or should do for God. But what if he wasn’t who God thought he was? What if he just wasn’t up to it? Would it work out? Really? He had the stomach churning doubts that any human being has before a huge event. Oh, wouldn’t it be nice just to know for sure that it would work! Wouldn’t it be good to know that it wasn’t all some delusion, some hopeless quest! If only there was some sign to give him that certainty.

Then his stomach rumbled. And a little voice in his head said, “You know if I really was the son of God, I mean really, really the son of the creator of the whole universe.....God knows I haven’t eaten a bite for ages. Oh, for a chunk of fresh bread! Well it would be a snap to re-arrange a few molecules and have that rock, that one there, turn into a loaf of warm bread. It would be easy. And it would prove, really prove that I *am* the son of God and I could stop worrying. I would know for sure!”

And another voice said, “Yes, you would know for sure. You would never have to go on trusting Him, or believing, or leaning on Him in blind faith. You would know. Then you could do it all on your own.”

And wouldn’t it be nice to know for sure that we will succeed and be dazzlingly effective in Grace Church on Kennedy Road? I’d like to know that this isn’t a gamble, a risk, a shot in the episcopal dark that could end in disaster! Yes I too would like proof. Wouldn’t you? Then we could just go ahead and plan and act, never needing to trust or hope or doubt or cling to God for courage.

How does the Enemy tempt us? He never sits down next to me for a chat. I never find evil embodied in a red suit with horns and tail. For me it is the little inner conversation which pulls and pushes and tries to make sense of things, and tries to make things safe and easier. It is then that I am led away from trust and dependence on God. For what is the work of the enemy? It is gradually, gently, almost imperceptibly to loosen our hold on God’s hand. Jesus suddenly said, “It’s not bread or proofs that keeps me alive. It is listening to God’s whispers and words that makes me alive. And I don’t always know when one is coming.”

Well, trusting in God is a good thing. Yes. But, of course, being God’s son and all you really should be making a difference in the world. I mean, God didn’t send you here to be invisible!

“Yes,” Jesus thinks, “I want everyone to know about my Father’s love. It’s not about guilt and punishment and that angry God the Pharisees bully everyone with. It’s not about laws and rules and how you wash your socks. It’s about compassion, about justice, about trust and righteous decisions. It’s about actually living with love now, as if we were already in heaven. I wish I could tell the whole world that. I wish everyone could hear my voice and listen!”

And a little voice says, "Well, you could probably do that. Who has access to the world? The Romans do! You need to get in with them. You'll have to moderate some of what you might say. Tone down this, play up that.... It's definitely do-able. That would be the quickest way to get your ideas out there..."

And in Grace Church we said we hoped to deepen our Unity as a church and broadening our community with other people. We want to reach out to other people with this really great thing we have. We want to share our faith, our trust, our hope in God with young people. We want everyone to know that we are there. We want to be seen, known about, talked about and influencing Scarborough. We want to do this trusting in God, being lead by lead by God and inspired by Him.

It is not so wrong, surely? To want to shine your light so brightly that everyone sees it.... is that wrong? The temptation is in what you will do to get that done, and how quickly you get there. It is called "selling out". It is about denying who *we are*, and how we, as people of faith in God should operate, that is the temptation. It is the temptation to take the short cut. How many faithful Pastors have come unstuck because they wanted a TV channel to speak to the world and enjoyed the glory, and did anything to get it. Do we worship success, or do we worship God? Jesus said "God" What you spend your energy, time and skills trying to get, that is what you worship. Is that God?

So we come to the third temptation.

For Jews God's home was the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews were divided by Sadducees and Pharisees, the school of Rabbi Hillel, the school of Rabbi Shammai, Torah and Talmud.

If Jesus did some great and incontrovertible miracle, showing God had clearly appointed him, then his grace and authority would unite God's people. Love without barriers or distinction would flow from the Holy Mountain of Jerusalem and reach to the ends of the earth. There would be joy because the Messiah had come. Of course this would be what God longed for from his son!

Yet, something was wrong with this. Jesus could just feel that it was not quite right, although the thought of this was very, very attractive. His life would then be utterly supported by the evidence of that miracle and everyone would have to believe in him. He would do his work of teaching unquestioned and unchallenged. He would have solid ground beneath his feet. He would never have to walk by faith again.

But was it not in the unknowing, in the having to trust that he had found his closeness with his Father? Was it not the very heart of his way of life to only trust God and risk all else? He had to live by trusting, not by testing God. He had to believe that God was with him and he with God, not have it proved to him or anyone else. Jesus had made his choice to walk with the unseen, unknowable God, the awesome and holy one of Israel. He would walk with God even when he could no longer touch Him. He would walk with him into death. He would reach out and trust only the invisible hand to hold him.

And we have a sense of God's hope and vision for us is to be united in him and with each other. We believe He sees us as a place of worship and of welcome. He longs for us to be vibrant, really alive in faith, in music, in outreach, in prayer. He wants us to be like him, with no barriers to love, no end of hope, no shortage of trust and never running out of forgiveness and belief. He wants us to be his voice, his hands, his heart in Scarborough. But like Jesus, we must never force this, or use the clever tricks or gimmicks that are out there. We must never be smug, or superior. For we walk in faith, in faith only.

Whenever you draw near to the path of Christ, you are heading for the Father. Those who live the spiritual life have found that when you get close to God the Enemy gets closer to you too, pulling you back, pulling you away. Just like the little inner conversations that give you utterly reasonable arguments for why you should have another cigarette or just one more drink or not go for a walk today or whatever else you are trying to get sorted in your life. So the tempter enters your head and your heart in the gentlest and most innocent ways with arguments that sound so plausible, and comfortable.

I think you will never meet the Devil incarnate. But just because you don't recognize the enemy doesn't mean that there is not a force pushing you always away from God. The battle ground is never obvious. It is just there, just behind your conscious mind, in just the same place that God waits to embrace you in love.