

**A sermon preached at the 10 am Sung Eucharist
at St Peter's Church, Bournemouth,
by the Team Rector, The Rev'd Dr Ian Terry,
on the First Sunday of Lent, 14th February, 2016.**

Today's Gospel shows Jesus being tempted. Temptations don't always come before us as clear-cut choices, between obvious good or evil, rather they are attitudes that we can slip into – attitudes which form our behaviour. Those attitudes are there, just under the surface of what we're about, ***all the time*** – so I rather like this little prayer:

Dear God, so far today, I've done all right. I have not gossiped, and I have not lost my temper. I haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish, and I'm really glad of that! But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help. Thank you!

In terms of what you might call 'bad attitudes', Thomas Merton reckoned that *the biggest human temptation is "to settle for too little."*

What might that mean?

Well –try this: One day, three men were hiking and unexpectedly came upon a large raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how they would do it.

The first man prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river." Vvm! God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, - but only after almost drowning a couple of times.

Seeing this, the second man prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength ... and the tools to cross this river." Vvm! God gave him a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about an hour, - but only after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times.

The third man had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools...and the intelligence... to cross this river." And vvm! God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple of hundred yards, then *walked* across the bridge.

Certainly, the first two men had settled for too little. Butperhaps that's not quite what we mean ...?

Let's try again: when Thomas Merton said that the biggest human temptation is *to settle for too little*, I reckon many Christians find themselves tempted – in terms of the attitudes they carry around with them as a habit – in, let's say, three ways of ***settling for too little***:

1. Jesus was tempted to satisfy his hunger; but my gut feeling is that we just generally expect too little from

God; by which I mean that we are tempted not to believe in grace. We act and speak as though '*God can't do it*', and if anything is going to be achieved it has to be all our own efforts, or not at all. Far from showing that we believe in a generous God of undeserved forgiveness and new beginnings, who has wired us up to be similarly generous (as we have been remembering in our stewardship initiative in these past few weeks), we are tempted to settle for 'getting-by' with what we can manage.

2. Jesus was tempted to grasp at public power; but, by contrast, we are tempted to turn everything inwards and to *privatise* our Christianity. Of course, ours is a personal relationship, one-on-one, with a personal God, but only to the extent that each member of a family has personal relationships with each other – relationships which only make sense within the wider context of the whole family and of the wider society of which we are all part. In this way, also, we are tempted to settle for a God who is too small, who has no notion of transforming the unjust structures of society and doing something about global inequalities and violent power games – a privatised Christianity merely blesses the status quo, and is not recognisably drawn from the same Bible as we read from week by week – it is *all too small*, self-justifying and inward-looking.

3. Jesus was tempted to throw himself down, to clearly demonstrate that he was God and could be relied upon; whereas, by contrast, we find ourselves tempted *away from hope* – and towards a God who, if you analyse it, really isn't up to very much, and, therefore, could hardly be a source of hope, let alone someone in whom you put your faith! We are tempted to be risk-averse and pessimistic, with our glass always half-empty.

Of course, as we begin Lent, it is right for us to remember that the truth is the exact opposite of these temptations, which are barely-disguised self-fulfilling prophecies of doom!

The truth, as shown in the Gospels again and again, and affirmed by the Church, is that 'God most certainly can do it!', because where we are weak, there He is strongest, and because His unearned forgiveness and healing, and fullness of life, is, and always will be, more than sufficient for our needs.

The truth is that the heart of God is 'relational' not privatised, and deep within God is an unsatisfied yearning for social and political justice, peace and gentleness with each other.

The truth is that the Gospels show Jesus as healing one person after another, according to their need, and each of the Gospels affirms his self-sacrificing death, for us, with the living hope of His resurrection. Without that – why

bother?! But, with that, our glass must always be at least half-full, and Christians have a ministry and mission to actively share hope with others. That, and that alone, is why we can be generous – not just because God is generous with us, but because his generosity of self-giving overflows into a lively hope both for this world, which matters to God immensely, and for the life to come, where a mutuality of hospitality and generosity will characterise the heavenly places of the new Jerusalem.

So, as we start Lent, and draw together our stewardship initiative, let us be aware of these ungodly attitudes into which we, and all Christians, are always tempted. And, I would strongly suggest to you, our determination needs to be that with which we start the ancient service of Compline, or the monastic Night Prayers:

“Sisters and brothers, be alert, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil prowls about, seeking whom he may devour – whom we resist, steadfast in the faith of Jesus!”

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