

Sermon by Rev Carole Barnet – 10th March 2019

Luke 4:1-13

**May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Today, I have a confession to make. Just over 18 months ago, our daughter introduced me to a game to play on my mobile phone. It involves getting rid of waffle shapes by making rows of three symbols of the same type and colour. I know, it sounds a bit inane, and, certainly at first, this is what I thought. However, before very long, I was hooked, almost addicted. When I start playing, I completely lose myself in the game. I waste time that otherwise should probably be better spent with those I love and who love me - my family, my friends and, of course, with God. When I analysed it, I found (to my shock) that I spend more time playing than praying. And, yet, which of these are more worthwhile, which are more life-giving? I argue it helps me to relax but does it enrich my life? Does it feed my soul? So often it is difficult to resist the temptation.

For centuries, the Church has reflected on the human condition and on temptation as a universal human experience. And I do not seek to trivialise temptation with my story. But, I do think it is symptomatic of the life we often lead that separates from God's invitation for us to love and to be loved. Our observance of Lent that began last Wednesday, presents a forty-day period for self-examination, reflection, and repentance that calls to mind Jesus' own struggle with temptation.

All of us know what it is to be tempted. There isn't a single one of us who hasn't had the experience of being torn between pleasing ourselves rather than others, or seeking to win recognition or favour, or to manoeuvre just a little, manipulate just a bit, to get what we want. And, if we are honest, it can be a real struggle.

Personally, I find great comfort in the thought that Jesus also struggled with temptation and perhaps even his own identity. And we know that he struggled with this even to the point of his crucifixion when he called out to God: "Why, O why have you forsaken me?" This clearly shows Jesus' human side and it is undoubtedly something we all relate to. This is life. This was Jesus' life experience and it is ours.

It might seem surprising that Jesus *could* actually have *struggled* to choose between right and wrong. I suspect most of us have an image of Jesus as the perfect being, both human and divine, as someone *quite unlike us* for whom doing the right thing came naturally and without effort. (He was the Son of God, after all.) And actually, this morning's Gospel reading doesn't do much to dispel that image. Jesus seems to resist the temptations without effort or strain, simply by quoting a few well-chosen verses of Scripture. Where's the struggle?

I don't know about you, but this is not my experience of being tempted, even if it is a seemingly minor matter such as dipping our hands into the biscuit barrel one more time than we perhaps really ought to!

In the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is tempted three times to use the powers God has given him to his own advantage.

First, whilst fasting on a forty-day retreat, he is tempted to turn the stones in the barren wilderness into loaves of bread. Not only to satisfy his own hunger but,

perhaps then too, to feed the hungry masses and to gain a popular following? An easy path to success!

Then Jesus is led to a high mountain place and is offered everything he can see and more, if only he will bow down and pledge allegiance to the evil forces that pervade life.

Finally, Jesus is led to the pinnacle of the temple, where it is suggested he seeks a sign from God to confirm that he is indeed the Messiah. Surely, God would save his Chosen One from harm. Furthermore, the crowds will clearly see once and for all that he is the Son of God.

Jesus was tested in every way, just as we are. And yet he replies: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test".

Each time, Jesus demonstrates his obedience and faithfulness to God who gives him the strength to persevere and to overcome the temptations set before him.

And, we are to follow the example of Jesus. We, too, can turn to God who knows our weaknesses, who knows we are often tempted and, yet, who is always ready to forgive us, to rescue us and to save us from ourselves and the distractions of this world. And this is what brings us to this Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist today. This is what brings us to the altar with hope and expectation that God will pour out His grace and mercy on us as we come either to receive His blessing or, as we come with our hands outstretched, (perhaps a bit like Charles Dickens' Oliver) almost begging to know God's presence and His provision in the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

We are all tempted; we all lose our way; we all need to be rescued, saved, fed and loved. The good news of God is that we have a Saviour, one who was tempted in every way and yet did not succumb, so that he is able to save and deliver us through the victory of the cross, through his death and resurrection.

We are only human and often we do succumb to temptation but I often find, eg when playing my game, that something breaks into my conscience that tells me I really should be doing something more worthwhile, more meaningful in my life. And that is God at work as He disturbs us and challenges us.

When tempted to take that extra biscuit or when Dorothy at Pre-School Praise keeps goading you to eat cake; when tempted to gossip a little or to be self-focused, how often do you say: "I know I shouldn't but". I know I shouldn't but what? I will anyway, or I'll not do it, instead I'll take a moment to ask God what I should be doing.

Jesus turned to God who gave him the strength to resist the temptations laid before him and to remain faithful to the God of Love. And God does the same for us. So, use this Lent as a period for self-examination, for reflection. Know that God is quicker to forgive than we are to confess. Don't struggle. Spend time with God in prayer. Put your trust in Him and know that, with His power behind you, you can achieve all things. Turn to the God of Love and catch a glimpse of His mercy and saving grace here and now.

Amen.