

Sermon – Lent I Year A
Haselton, Hampnett and Northleach

Here's a question to ponder – how did Adam and Eve know they were in the Garden of Eden? How did they know that their experience of life was perfect?

The answer lies in the concept of the fall, which is conveyed to us in Genesis through the traditional tale of the tree of knowledge, the crafty serpent and the weakness of humanity.

Our appreciation of creation, beauty, truth, sacrifice and all the other virtues of life are all relative; we appreciate them only through our knowledge and experience of their opposites.

In this paradox is the source of human wisdom, and intriguingly it is through this paradox that we are able to draw closer to the nature of God, both in terms of our own experience and within our own natures too.

A story does not need to be literal for it to convey truth, as anyone who visits the cinema knows. The same is true of scripture; the factual basis of the creation myths is irrelevant in any assessment of their value; the stories communicate clearly to us of the majesty of creation and humanity's tragic – yet essential – fall into sin.

We have a mug at home that bears the words '*lead me not into temptation, I can find the way myself*'.

That is probably more true for most of us than we would wish to admit. With the onset of Lent we find ourselves in that annual predicament as to how to mark this season of penitence and reflection. Every year I stare at the oncoming of Lent and recognise my lack of discipline rearing up ahead of me. I see it in the unnecessary piece of cake or the second glass of wine just as easily as I see it in my inattentiveness in prayer, my selfish use of the world's resources, the suffering of others that I ignore.

We must resist the temptation to turn Lent into the annual season in which we beat ourselves up for our own inadequacies. It might be more helpful to view it as the Season of Humility in which we seek to place ourselves in right relationship with God rather than try to ascent an

impossibly high spiritual mountain. It was Jesus who was transfigured after all, and not his disciples.

If we turn to our gospel reading, this theme of humility flows through the experience of Jesus as he faced temptation by the devil.

One way to read the temptations is to consider it as a conversation not between Jesus and the Devil but between Jesus and himself or between Jesus and God. In other words, to consider the portrayal of the devil quite literally as the 'devil's advocate'; the voice of God challenging Jesus to stray away from his true identity in God.

The familiarity of the three-fold temptations can mask their significance.

First, this was an experience God needed Jesus to experience ahead of his ministry: Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit.

Secondly, the temptations came when Jesus was at his weakest – at the end of 40 days and nights of fasting. This was a really serious attempt by God to test Jesus to the absolute limit.

And then the three temptations themselves: the first concerns control over the world's resources – in this case bread; the second, control over the powers of creation – in this case the enticement to demonstrate a miracle; the third, control over the power of worldly materialism as reflected in the political and military kingdoms of the world.

In each case Jesus resists, not through strength of character or will, but by drawing upon the Word of God.

The similarity between the temptations to which Jesus was subjected and the temptations that beset our world are quite remarkable.

At a macro level the powers that control our world – especially the multi-national corporations and major political power blocs – are involved in a continuous struggle to control and exploit the world's resources, to find ever new ways to overcome the constraints that nature places upon humanity, to pursue material wealth and power regardless of the consequences for others now or in generations to come.

Jesus demonstrates humility in the face of temptation and draws upon his identity in God to counteract the devil's inducements to betray himself.

It is this humility, this recognition of God's primacy, that should guide us through Lent and beyond; so that we too do not find ourselves unwittingly betraying our true identity in God.

Making Lent different to the rest of the year is a good spiritual discipline. Even better though, is to make permanent adjustments to our lives that can last beyond Lenten disciplines and help to re-shape not only ourselves and our families but our community and the wider world too.

It is at this point that many clergy turn to suggestions for Lenten activities that focus upon making a difference; suggestions to take up new commitments to charitable and church activities in particular.

My suggestion this year is different. Mirroring Jesus' experience in the desert in which he rebutted the devil by drawing on the wisdom of his faith, my suggestion this Lent is that we seek ways to feel more secure in what we believe and how we share our faith with others; for ultimately it is our faith that will enable us to resist the temptations of the world and not good works, essential though they are.

This is the theme of our lent course this year, which continues this Tuesday at Northleach Church at 7.30pm. If you are free, please come.

Very many of us do not feel as confident about our faith as we would wish. Even if we never discuss faith with anyone else and perhaps rarely even in our hearts with ourselves, feeling secure in our faith is critical to our spiritual well-being now and for eternity. So this Lent let us be brave and dare to explore our faith a little more deeply and through finding greater security in what we believe, feel more equipped to resist the temptations of this world.

In Jesus' name we ask this, Amen.