

Lent, temptation, introspection & an inner journey

a sermon preached on the
first sunday in Lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend emily fraser

The lections: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-21, Matthew 4:1-11

On Ash Wednesday, David invited us to spend this Lent 'inside', using the season of Lent as a time for prayerful introspection, reflection and meditation. This is a time for stillness in the presence of God as we contemplate the meaning and reality of Easter for us here and now. This is a gift and an opportunity we have been offered during this season of preparation. However, this gift is not necessarily easily accepted, or easily used, especially in the light of today's readings, where we are placed face to face with the reality of temptation, human frailty and the flaws within human nature, which both Adam and Christ faced in fullest measure. In this season of Lent, we too are called to examine our temptations, those things which separate us from God, and from our true selves. We are called to change and grow in response to God's loving compassion, which surrounds us all. This is a time where we can grow fruitfully, but like all growth spurts, they're tiring and take emotional and physical energy.

And how shall we respond to those temptations we identify? Lent is not a period of self-criticism and self-hatred in an attempt to emotionally berate ourselves, but a time for us to hold those things we discover about ourselves before God, prayerfully and openly, in the knowledge that these things are part of ourselves. And, being part of ourselves, are forgiven, accepted and are even beloved of God.

Christ's temptation in the wilderness speaks hope, in that, when we offer ourselves to God, as we are, even under the brightest and most glaring of spotlights, we are understood and loved completely, because Christ stands with us, as one who shared our human experience of temptation, and extending compassion, mercy and love to us as we journey through life and grow in faith. Christ withstood temptations of self-security, pride and greed, and when we turn to Christ in the face our own temptations, we turn to a Christ who does not condemn, but welcomes, helps and stands beside us.

So Lent is not a season of self-hatred, but of honesty. Honesty with ourselves about ourselves, and honesty with God. It's about retreating to that space where you can spend time in contemplation of and with God, to know both yourself and God more fully. It's a challenge that I have set myself for the coming weeks, and one I invite you to undertake too.

In the passage from Genesis, Adam is tempted with the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I will always remember a sermon I heard which asked an important question in the face of common condemnation of the woman as being the temptress responsible for the fall of man – was the woman disobedient in taking and eating the fruit, or was she an adventurer, an explorer – willing to dare, willing to embrace whatever happened after eating that fruit? I'll leave you to ponder on that yourself.

The contrast between the passage from Genesis and the text from the Gospel according to Matthew is too clear-cut for my liking; both Adam and Christ face the test of temptation, Adam fails spectacularly and Christ passes with high distinction. Christ is indeed resolute in the face of temptation, that we read and hear clearly from the text. But I think there's something else to it, beyond the surface story of Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience. Certainly, there is more to it than a narrative which proves the perfection of Christ and the imperfection of Adam, and it is revealed when we delve deeper.

These narratives are about human nature. Human nature at its deepest. Human nature which includes tendencies toward evil. Human nature which has the capacity to act terribly against one another, and against the world we live in. Human nature which can produce both the benevolence of philanthropy and compassionate charity, and the abuse and intolerance of immigration detention centres.

These passages reveal that humanity is flawed, and also that we have the choice to act faithfully like Christ, or to succumb to our frail nature. To succumb isn't to fall into the clutches of Satan with no hope of redemption, but it is to be distanced from God. However, this distancing is not permanent. We are reconciled with God whenever we turn to Christ and to God, every time we pray, and every time we express our belief in the love and mercy of God. Because time after time, whenever we turn back to God, we are welcomed, just as the prodigal son was welcomed. So this Lent, let us explore and embrace that we too are prodigal, and loved, and that Christ stands as the sign of the love God bears us all.

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