

## The Snake

Today is, the first Sunday of Lent, and today we mark the beginning of the end for Jesus, in this life anyway. Today we chart his lonely journey to the Cross, to that place of humiliation and pain; over the next six weeks, we will walk with Jesus on the road to his cross; we will engage with his feelings and his anxiety.

This Sunday is traditionally the day we consider his temptations or testing in the desert, or wilderness as it is known. This in fact was at the beginning of his ministry. Luke tells us that "Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days and he was hungry".

Jesus had been baptised in the Jordan by his cousin John the Baptist, and he was Spirit full and the Spirit leads him into a time of testing.

In our reading today from John's Gospel Jesus speaks about the Devil calling him a murderer and a liar. Jesus had no problem believing in a Devil; throughout his ministry he was often assaulted by the Devil.

Our Christian faith has a devil in it! Just as the snake was in the middle of God's garden!

We somehow want to eradicate the place of the Devil. However, there is a great phrase, "the devil is in the details" and the Devil has certainly been there from the beginning of creation. He's in the details of God's story of salvation!

Genesis 1 begins with God creating, everything was good God said; after each day and on the sixth day he created humans and God blessed them and said be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground...and God saw it was good.

Genesis 2 focuses on the creation of Adam and Eve, and how he placed them into his beautiful garden, and in that garden, God places his two humans, to care for His creation, and with the instructions, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden but you must not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" 2v16,17

All is well in Paradise, until we turn another page in our Bibles, and we read in Chapter 3, "Now the snake was craftier than any of the wild animals that the Lord God had made".

We are introduced to a new character in the story, a crafty character, the snake.

It is in God's garden that evil is lurking, and is to be found! In his garden God was prepared to take the risk of human freedom; part of that freedom is the freedom not to trust in God. The freedom not to trust in God becomes the doorway to the loss of freedom itself, and human beings are faced with that choice daily, by the tempting voice of the snake.

The snake is portrayed in the Bible as the symbol of the Devil. The Devil finds a way through the snake to get at Adam and Eve in the heart and the heart of God's beautiful garden!

As we look out into our world at this very moment, it's not too difficult to believe in an evil power that is causing such mayhem in God's creation; a dark force which is at war with God and his principles of justice and love. The Apostle Paul said that our fight is not against humans but evil coming from another world. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms".

Ephesians 6 v12

The Church of Satan is alive in parts of the world today; witchcraft is part of the culture of many areas of the world, tarot cards and ouija boards find a place in people's homes. We should never underestimate the interest in the darker side of life!

The demonic is not only found in the weird and the occult, but also in the paralysing systems of the destructive power in society; in the slanderous world of lies, deceit and doing the other down, in blame shifting and aggressiveness and retaliation and revenge, which so colours our broken and fragile planet at the moment and disfigures our international life and its not only on the international stage its also in our own lives and communities and homes. The Devil looks for open doors and susceptible people to work through and cause mischief. The snake is still in the garden!

This story in the garden is not a story essentially of how evil came into the world, its already there! But it is a story that questions our own responsibility with God's world and the response that we make to God's word.

So, we know what happened, we know how the woman was tempted by listening to the snake. The serpent doesn't deny the goodness of God, rather

he whispers small seeds of mistrust. The serpent twists God's words to suit its own designs; when we listen to these words, then we can be sure that we are on a slippery slope; once we have opened this discussion with the tempter, as to what God really meant, then we are skating on thin ice.

We say each week, in our prayers, "Lead us not into temptation", a wise prayer because we are praying that we will not even go there or enter into a place that gives the Devil the opportunity to steal our freedom and compromise our lives.

Jesus could have taught his disciples, "Lead us out of temptation", but he chose to teach them, "Lead us not into temptation".

Because he knew that once we get near the tree, our pulses begin to stir, curiosity flares up, and our passions are aroused, and our ability to make decisions is paralysed.

Temptations usually begin with trivia. How can it be that so great a fall can begin with so small an incident?

One piece of forbidden fruit, and the whole world falls apart! The serpent touches the woman at the one small thing in her life, where she was not ready to give everything over to God.

The serpent comes to us, and touches us at the one thing in our lives, where we would rather God did not trouble us. We will give him everything else, but we will hold that one part to ourselves.

Some habit, some possession, some secret sin, some bitter resentment – in the context of our whole life, it seems so small, and yet it is at that one point that our trust in God is tested. If we will not let God be God at this one small, trivial, yet so crucial a point, then we really do not trust him where it matters at all.

C S Lewis in his classic book, "The Great Divorce", quotes the words of Scottish minister George McDonald, "No, there is no escape. There is no Heaven with a little of Hell in it. No plan to retain this or that of the Devil in our hearts or our pockets. Our Satan must go, every hair and feather."

Jesus would have known the story of Adam and Eve in his Scriptures.

Jesus also was to experience the tempting power of the Devil, as he strides into the desert and stays for 40 days.

What was his experience?

The temptation story is sacred because it could only have come from the lips of Jesus. He must have shared this story often with his disciples and it was passed on and eventually recorded.

The temptations tell us something quite unique about Jesus, they could only be temptations of someone who had the ability to turn stones into bread and to jump from the top of a temple. He had unique powers and he had to decide how to use them.

The wilderness was 35 miles by 15 miles, it was called the Devastation. The hills were like dust heaps, the limestone looked blistered, and peeling; the rocks were bare and jagged, the ground glowed with heat like a vast furnace – it was in that awful devastation that Jesus was tempted.

His surroundings for his temptations contrast that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. As we know they fell at the first hurdle and so their garden turned into a wilderness, and now Jesus is in the wilderness to bring salvation so that the wilderness will be transformed into that garden again!

It's important to remember that the temptations did not just come in 3 dreams but rather his 40 days were one of testing every fibre of his being. He was wrestling with how he could save mankind. It was a long battle which never ceased until he said on the Cross, "It is finished". The victory was won.

But the temptations were very real to Jesus. The Devil immediately finds his weak spot and that was his physical hunger. He had the power to turn water into wine, surely, he could turn stones into bread and the Devil knew this. *Come on Jesus, show me your power*, the Devil taunted him. *If you are going to save the world, if you are the Son of God, then people need to see that you are all-powerful.* The limestones looked very like the small pieces of bread that the Jews ate and Jesus could easily have given in – who would have noticed, in the desert!

But Jesus rose above this temptation of materialism and he said that it is written, "Man does not live on bread alone". In other words, the material things of this world will not sustain a human being, what will sustain them is the Word of God.

"Seek first the Kingdom of God, "and all things shall be added was what Jesus taught ,and these thoughts are behind this statement, seek God first, put Him first and all the material things will come after.

Next, Jesus is taken to the top of the world, the highest mountain in which he could see the vast expanse of this planet. "Worship me and this will be yours" But for Jesus, there was no compromise with the Devil; as alluring as the whole world looked to him from this vantage point, Jesus knew that the world would only be won through his Cross. The Cross would be what would draw people into his Kingdom. His reply was strong and direct, "Worship the Lord your God and Him only!"

The third temptation takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, there was sheer drop of 450 feet into the Kedron valley. This was a miracle to give people sensations. Jesus said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test". He knew that the hard way of service and of suffering leads to the Cross, but after the Cross to the crown.

Luke finishes his temptation narrative with the words, *the Devil left him until an opportune time.*

Our salvation begins here with Jesus in the desert; if he had compromised and given in to the Devil at this point, then there would be no Cross and no salvation.

Our salvation depends on Jesus and his faithfulness in resisting the power of evil.

Adam and Eve gave in, but Jesus the second Adam, stood firm and he was prepared to take the way of difficulty and suffering knowing that this would lead him to reverse the curse that was on the Earth.

So, on this first day of Lent, we are already beginning to see that Jesus was prepared to go all the way. That he had God's Kingdom in his sights; he had the renewal of the world in his vision and he knew that his one solitary life was the sacrifice for everyone.

So after the temptations Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; his ministry had truly begun and God could work through Jesus because of his obedience and faithfulness.

What does it say to us this morning?

Well we are told in 1 Peter 5 v8, be alert for your enemy the Devil prowls looking for someone to devour". Be on your guard, watch out, for temptation will strike at a moment when we do not expect it.

Our readings today teach us three things.

Stay away from the tree! Don't put yourself in a compromising situation. Be wise!

Always be ready. Jesus fasted for 40 days. He did this so he was prepared, he went into the temptations with the spirit of God leading him. Be prepared for temptations strikes us all! Be prepared!

Remember when you are going through temptation, Christ has been there before you and he withstood it and he will give you strength if you lean on him. Be equipped!

So, when the Devil comes as he will and invites you to compromise and turn your stones into bread, tell him that the only bread that you need is the Word of God.

When he comes and tells you that if you want to be a great Christian you must do something spectacular, tell him that he is wrong, that all you need is to be faithful to God.

When he comes and promises you power and wealth, if you bow down to him, tell him that the way to true power is through serving and loving God and each other.

Go forward today, knowing that your Lord and Saviour has power over all temptation, and "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

*What a friend we have in Jesus,*

*all our sins and griefs to bear!*

*What a privilege to carry*

*everything to God in prayer!*

*O what peace we often forfeit,*

*O what needless pain we bear,*

*all because we do not carry*

*everything to God in prayer!*

Let us sing "*What a friend we have in Jesus*" – CH4 547!