

Only once have I had to walk through a line of protestors to go and see a film in a cinema. It was some years ago and the film was *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I don't know if you remember it and the protestors were lardy nuns in their habits, waving placards, so it was a slightly unnerving experience.

The film had its flaws, but I think the central premise of the film was sound: that Jesus (this a film about Jesus's temptation) the premise was that this was a real temptation and it imagined what would've happened if Jesus had made a different choice, if He had been lured off the path to which He was called, and I think that's a subject which is worthy of attention.

And the church has often struggled with the humanity of Jesus: that we know Jesus was from God and of God, and yet we know too, that He entered fully into the human experience, that His temptations, His testings, were the same as the temptations that each of us faced.

The Book of Hebrews makes that clear. It says that Jesus was able to sympathize with our weaknesses, as He was tested in every way we are, yet without sin. And the writer goes on to say that it was because He was tested, that He is able to help those who are being tested. And that's the point of this sermon, to see what we can learn from Jesus' experience of temptation, that we might apply to our own lives, when we face temptation and testing too.

The first point I'd make about Jesus's temptation is that this is the most famous story of Jesus' testing and temptation, in the wilderness when He's been out for 40 days fasting. But it's not the only account of Jesus being tested in the gospels.

There's that strange story in Mark's gospel, if you remember, where Jesus starts to teach about His suffering, going to Jerusalem and Peter says, "Oh, no, no, that can't happen." And Jesus says to Him, "Get behind me, Satan." That seems to be a moment where Jesus recognized that He was being invited, tempted, veered off the path that was set before him.

And then in the other gospel that Jesus, He feeds 5,000 people miraculously and the crowd comes and rushes and looks to anoint Jesus as king but He just withdraws. That temptation for worldly power is there but He doesn't take it.

And then the night before he was crucified in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prays that powerful prayer to his Father. "Lord, if it's possible, take this cup from me. Take this cup of suffering from me." And that I think we need to recognize as a genuine request and prayer that Jesus was

fixed with a real choice. He could have gone a different way. He was tested and tempted to take the easy path, but He chose not to.

So if we read the gospels closely, we can see that Jesus was tempted outside of His time in the wilderness. He was tempted other more subtle ways. And so it is with us, we face a whole variety of temptations that come in so many different forms. But whatever form it comes, there are certain characteristics of temptation and testing that I think we can see in the gospel that might ring bells with us.

For instance, Jesus, when He was tempted in the wilderness, wasn't simply given a choice between good and evil. So it is with us, the temptation that comes to us is very rarely a choice that's very easily we can see as good and something we can easily see as bad. That's what makes it hard. So, Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread. Matthew tells us He was famished. The ground or the rocks on the ground would've looked like loaves of bread.

What was wrong with that? We could imagine the devil whispering in his ear, "If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread." And why not? Eating bread isn't wrong. There's another story in the gospel where Jesus miraculously makes bread, so it's not an inherently bad thing to do. But Jesus knew that it is written, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The first temptation is about Jesus using his power for selfish ends. It's more of a temptation to take a shortcut, to meet an immediate need, doing the right thing the wrong way. That's what makes it relevant to us. Ends don't justify means and that's what makes resisting temptation difficult.

Something else we might recognize about Jesus' experience is that He was tempted through His ifs. The third temptation was to jump off a high place and angels could have caught Jesus, broken His fall. It's precisely because that was a possibility that He was tempted to do it. You and I won't be tempted to jump off a high place, but a person with a gift of the gab, might be tempted to talk their way out of something, when they should own up to something.

The strong self-confident person might be tempted with pride. We're all tempted through our gifts, not just our vulnerabilities. Someone once told me that weaknesses are overdeveloped strengths and I think that's right. We are vulnerable in our strong points, not just our weak points.

And something else about the temptation we see in the story is that Jesus is tempted straight after his baptism. That high point in the gospel where the voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased." That must have been very uplifting for Jesus and all the those who were there. That must have been a moment where He felt particularly close to His Father and confident in His mission.

And then we are told He goes straight out into the wilderness. That's the very next thing that happened. And it's a common Christian experience that moments of great spiritual insight and uplift are followed by times of temptation.

There was a rector once went to a new parish. He hadn't been there very long, but it was going very well. They liked him. He liked them. It had a great celebration of ministry and the church warden went round to the rectory and it wasn't the rector that answered the door, but the rector's son. And the son said, "I'm sorry, Father can't come and meet with you. We'll have to come at a different time. He's been offered the post of the bishop of Bahamas." He said, "His six weeks holiday, twice the salary, a car. He's up in his room praying about it." And the church warden said, "Well, is your mother in? Is she praying with him?" And the son said, "No, no. She's upstairs in the bedroom packing the bags."

Our spiritual enemy is most likely to attack us when we're in a good place, when things are going well. And if you think about it, why would it be any different. If we wandered off the path, why would anyone tempt or lure us, because we're already off the path. It's only in good times that we are liable to face temptation.

It's a common Christian experience that times of real insight and closeness to God are followed by these wilderness experiences. So we see in the story Jesus, that His temptations are real, just as our times of testing and temptation are real. And Jesus, as we've seen, overcame that temptation.

So let me just end by seeing what lessons we might learn about how we can overcome temptation and there's two points. The first thing we might do is avoid places and situations that bring or lead us into temptation. There was a Baptist preacher called F.W. Boreham, which actually is a terrible name for any kind of preacher, Baptist or not.

But he was leading a party on a pilgrimage in the Australian bush and somebody went past him, said, "Oh, there's a huge python over there." And for some reason he desperately wanted to see it. So he went to see the python. Sure it was an enormous python, but it was

sleeping. Thought how boring. So he wanted to see it, so he poked it. Well, of course the python attacked him. He should have left it alone. We should leave sleeping dogs and snakes lying. Don't go tickling temptation. Avoid situations which you know are going to be difficult, challenging, and testing.

A young man went to the great reformer Martin Luther once and confessed that he was overcome with impure thoughts. And Martin Luther said, "Well, can't do much about that. You can't stop the birds flying in the air, but you can stop them nesting in your hair." Perhaps more importantly, we can learn from Jesus's response to the devil. Look at how the back and forth goes between Jesus and the one tempting Him. The devil comes with a temptation to turn bread into stone and Jesus gives the answer, "It is written that man shall not live by bread alone."

Devil moves on with a different tactic, but each time Jesus sticks with a response that begins, "It is written." It would appear that Jesus' knowledge of the Bible helped Him to repel the devil, that even Jesus didn't draw or rely on His own strength to resist temptation. He drew on the power of the word. And I suggest that we too, would benefit from knowing the Bible better. It gives us a spiritual strength. It helps us to resist those temptations and times of testing that come to us, as we too draw on that power of the Word.

And Lent, is a great time to get into the habit of reading the Bible. I'm not suggesting that we begin at the beginning because you won't get very far. But I am suggesting that we might take a small passage of scripture, perhaps bit of the gospel, work our way through a gospel or a psalm. I'd rather that we read small bits and we read slowly, than take on some great Bible reading challenge, in this season of Lent. We go slowly. We find a bit of scripture and ask God to speak to us through it, that he might give us spiritual resources, that Lent might be a time that we grow in faith and put down spiritual roots. That's what this season is for. It's not a time of denial. It's not a time to see how long we can go without something, I don't know.

But it is a time to say, "Well, let's get a good spiritual habit going." It's a time to try and build up our spiritual strength and resources, so that we can confront those difficult times that will inevitably come to us.

So, let's ask God to speak to us through His word. Let's ask for a sense, a glimpse of His presence, that we might be strengthened to resist temptation, that we can overcome times of testing, and be empowered to walk His ways. Amen.