

I remember one time seeing a ‘Charlie Brown’ cartoon. Christmas is approaching and Charlie Brown complains ‘My desire to misbehave is only just outweighed by my desire for expensive presents’.

That one appeals to me as it encapsulates rather nicely the inner turmoil of temptation. I thought of that as I began to reflect on our Gospel reading for today, the first Sunday of Lent.

The story is well known. Jesus, fasting in the wilderness, is tempted by Satan. We have the images of stones, the pinnacle of the Temple, the kingdoms of the earth in all their glory. Hunger can be quenched, crowds impressed, power gained – if only Jesus will be sensible. There have been numerous paintings produced reflecting on the scene, countless sermons preached on the wording, of the nuances of Satan’s beguiling words.

Fundamentally the temptations as presented to us in the Gospels represent an inner struggle as Jesus reflects on his forthcoming ministry. Which route to take – the easy or the difficult, the spectacular, the actions, the attitudes that would impress. Each one is considered and put aside as Jesus prepares to embark upon a ministry of service, of self sacrifice, of self emptying obedience to the Father’s will that will eventually lead to the cross that is summarised in those beautiful words of Paul to the Church at Philippi.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
Phil 2:6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
Phil 2:7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
^{Phil 2:8} he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:5ff*

This is a ministry totally at odds with that offered by the words of the Tempter.

Temptation, far from being this once off desert experience, is an ongoing experience. When he speaks of his coming suffering to the disciples, Peter offers him a way out; ‘No Lord, this shall never happen to you.’ ‘Get behind me Satan.’

The agony in Gethsemene as he contemplates what lies ahead – ‘Let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want.’

The jeers of his enemies as he hung on the cross: ‘If he is the Son of God, let him now come down from the cross and we will believe.’

I spoke earlier of the inner turmoil of temptation. We all know that inner tension between what we know is right and the easier, smoother path. Because that is an inner tension, there is an essential loneliness to temptation.

It is here that I turn to that passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that I have put in a text box on the front of our lesson sheets:

. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. *Heb 4:15,16*

That passage speaks to me of a solidarity between my experience and that of Jesus. Jesus knows what it is like to be me. He knows the frailty of our human nature. In a very real way this takes some of the loneliness out of temptation. We have one with whom we can share our fears, our regrets, our failures; one is whose mercy and grace we find forgiveness and healing for the past and grace and strength to enable us to be more faithful in the future.

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
Give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.