

***“Journeying Through Temptation”***

(Matthew 4.1-11)

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***Adam, Eve and the Apple*** (Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7)

As children we were taught to read the Adam and Eve story as a failure... *paradise lost!* It was called *The Fall*... for at the beginning we had been perfect, but through this first act of sinful disobedience – eating the forbidden fruit – we became lesser, diminished people. We *fell* into an impaired corrupted version of who God intended us to be.

But at the same time we were being taught *this* version in Sunday School, 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians<sup>1</sup> were exploring a *different* reading of this story – an *ascent* (rather than a fall)... a movement forwards... from unformed *innocence* to fully developed *maturity*. Adam and Eve were *innocent* – that is, their eyes were not open to the full complexity of life – but they were not *perfect*... rather they were unformed (in the way we might speak of young children with lots of growing and learning ahead of them). Only experience – living life that is not idyllic but rather a mix of good and evil, joy and suffering... with that constant wrestle to choose the faithful path... only *this* imperfect conflicted life, could bring us to the true humanity God created us to be. It’s a journey begun with ‘Adam and Eve’ (who symbolise the first humans), which we continue today, as we slowly and torturously grow into the full beauty of humanity seen in Christ.

From the moment Adam and Eve eat the apple, their eyes are opened – they see reality without its idyllic packaging... (they recognise that they’re naked). And now they need to find their way through it. They need to leave the perfection of paradise in order to grow up. Yes, it’s going to be a terrible struggle... a path with significant suffering... but they need to walk it. Eating the apple *is* sinful disobedience... but it’s also necessary.

Depending on the situation, I’m happy to argue either or both readings of this ancient scriptural story... But today I’m preferencing the second – the 20<sup>th</sup> century version – because it says that the experience of temptation is not only inevitable, but it’s also necessary... in order for us to grow into our full humanity as God intended.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich is the one I remember in this regard.

### ***The Temptations of Christ***

Certainly that's how the Gospels present the Temptations of Jesus. It is the Spirit who takes Jesus into the desert, *in order* that he may be tested. It is necessary for Christ to journey through the wrestle with temptation, to experience in himself the struggle between good and evil, in order that he may be faithful to his calling as the Son of Man... the Human One... that truly radiant humanity we saw in the Transfiguration last Sunday. He needs to journey through temptation.

We are being taught that the same is true for us... Temptation is not a failure, not a sign of some terrible inner corruption, but rather an experience of struggle and choice... that we *need* to go through.

### ***The Nature and Essence of Temptation***

What is the nature and essence of temptation? (We need to move beyond our childish definition of 'thinking about doing naughty things'... for there are much bigger stakes at play here.)

In the Jesus-story, temptation is focused on three actions – turning stones into bread; jumping off the pinnacle of the temple; and selling his soul in order to rule the world. But's what's behind them? They are very much temptations to power and control. Esther de Waal – a contemporary scholar of Benedictine spirituality – named them in contemporary language as the temptation to be... relevant... spectacular... and powerful.<sup>2</sup>

I find this a very helpful description... it fits with much of the temptation throughout my life... But perhaps these are less strong than when I was young. I *did* feel 'that stuff' flutter amongst all the successful and important church leaders up in Brisbane last week... but much stronger was the temptation to interfere in my adult daughter's life...<sup>3</sup> Looking at

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<sup>2</sup> "Living With Contradiction" (1989)

<sup>3</sup> All about *her* happiness of course'!!!! *Nothing* to do with *my* desires at all. (Cough, cough...)

this, I assume the specific nature of our temptations will change through our life... depending on our age and stage. So it would be hard to come up with a concise list of universal temptations...

*Could you name yours at this place and time?*

It's important to be able to... or they will end up driving you without you ever being aware they're there. They'll present themselves as *reality... as compulsory...* without you ever seeing that you actually have a choice in whether you say Yes or No to them.

But while the specific *nature* of temptation will be different for each person... the *essence...* the desire/need that fuels and drives them... will be universal... the same for all of us.

The Adam and Eve story makes this starkly clear. In tempting the 'first woman' with the apple, The Serpent (the original Tempter) says, *'Eat this... and you'll be like God. You'll be the one in charge and you can order life to be exactly as you want it.'* The essence of all temptation is to want to assume the role of God – to have things the way *we* want them to be... not to accept them as they are.

It's the same for Jesus... He's tempted to:

- use magic to end the poverty of his people;
- to compel people to believe by a public demonstration of his power;
- to rule all the nations of the world.

Instead of living in the world as it is, the Tempter says, *'You can make it exactly the way you think it should be!'*

And that's the essence of the temptation we experience today... It preys on our desire to have life on our own terms... just the way we think it should be... according to our wants, needs, perceptions. (After all, I *do* know what's best for my daughter's happiness... *don't* I?) All temptation is to control... It whispers, *'Exert your power and influence and make it happen according to your will... just the way you want it.'*

***The Way Through***

When we look at it like this, temptation is an ugly business. But it's not a sign of failure or corruption. It is inevitable – part of the human experience. And it is necessary – we need to struggle with choice and discernment or else we'll never grow up.

But to be fully alive we need to journey *through* it. To give-in to temptation leads to ever more pain, suffering and blockage. To be blind to it, to be unaware of its power and presence, is to allow it to rule us, and to do great damage to ourselves and others. Simply put... we need to recognise temptation and say NO to it.

Christ is our model and guide... Despite the wiles of the Tempter – who even quotes Scripture as his source – Christ recognises these proposals for what they are... temptation to exert his will over his Father God. Christ says No... each time saying that he will not put aside his total trust in God. It's what we'll hear again in the Garden of Gethsemane – *'Not my will, God... but yours. Not my way, but yours.'*

To eschew temptation is to stay faithful to God... to surrender our desire for control... and to say instead. *'I will trust you God, whatever comes.'*

### **Conclusion**

Sure it's a struggle... and we carry the legacy of thousands of years of human wilfulness. But as the Apostle Paul says, that's nothing compared to the power-for-life unleashed in Christ Jesus. In today's reading from Romans (5.12-19) he says,

*"Just think what God's gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do! ...imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, ...in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides."*