

THE TROUBLE WITH TEMPTATION

It's been said that the trouble with resisting temptation is that we don't want to discourage it altogether. Temptation is fun, says the world. A little sin, a little self-indulgence here and there, does nobody any harm. It makes us more human doesn't it? I rather like the observation of Hilaire Belloc, that you don't need to worry about avoiding temptation – as you get older it starts avoiding you...

But there are always voices around us whispering attractive lies. I won't ask you to tell your neighbour what your secret temptations are (or shall I? No, don't worry!) But **we** know what those temptations are. We've lived with them for a long time. Think about yours for a moment, those familiar friends that never quite go away... So that's what we're talking about, those things you've just identified.

Now, there's a sense in which these temptations are actually useful. They test us; they give us a reality check on how our spiritual and ethical maturity is getting on. They sharpen our spiritual muscles. One of the desert fathers (those monks who lived in loose communities in the desert of north Africa in the 4-6 century) one of them went to his spiritual director and proudly announced, 'I've finally overcome all sexual temptation.' His SD said, 'Then go back and pray to be tempted again.' We become strong *in the struggle*, not by living in fantasy and avoiding it. Temptation tells us how we're doing.

And so Jesus went to the desert too. He'd just been baptised by his cousin John. It was a wonderful experience in which his Father had confirmed his calling in a voice from heaven. 'You are my Son, my beloved, and I'm thrilled to bits with you.'

So now he had to go and test his resolve as he set out on his ministry. Was he up to it? Was he strong enough? Would he be OK when the going got rough? Remember Jesus wasn't some kind of superman figure, able to zap reality into any shape he wanted. He wasn't God playing at being a man. He was a man, but a man fully open to God, soaked in God if you like, the blueprint for humanity, but still a man and subject to temptation.

In Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* you might remember that the devil is personified as a slimy creature who slinks around the edges of the film. But there's no need to give the devil a shape; Jesus would have heard the voice of temptation clearly enough in his own head. His temptations were, in a sense, about resorting to magic, instead of working with the fabric of the real world. That's one of the ways you can recognise temptation – it offers magical solutions to happiness or success or whatever.

Or, to put it another way, the temptations of Jesus were all about taking short cuts. 'You're hungry. Take a short cut. Turn this stone into bread.' 'I'll give you all the

kingdoms of the world in an instant. Take a short cut. But worship me first.' 'You want people to notice you and pay attention to what you're saying. Take a short cut and throw yourself off the temple roof and let angels catch you. They'll notice you then.' Short cuts, all of them.

Now, we all love short cuts, don't we? We love finding the rat-run that avoids the traffic jam. When I was a student I loved the series of Simple Guides that helped me blag my way through Contract and Land Law. When we get a new car, Wendy reads the entire manual, memorises it, and eats it. I just want to get in the car and drive it away. Matthew Syed in his influential book *Bounce* reckons that short cuts to brilliance are a myth, and that at least 10,000 hours of applied practice are needed, whether in sport, music or whatever. We love the idea of a short cut, but it's nearly always an illusion.

Here's a fact. There's no short cut to holiness. Jesus had been practising all his life (more than 10,000 hours!) so he was ready for his temptations. But the trouble is – **we** may not have been practising very hard at holiness. We'd love a *Seven Days to Holiness* programme, like *Seven Days to a Flat Tummy*, but it doesn't exist. Holiness takes time; there are no short cuts. Holiness, Christlikeness, comes from spending a lot of time looking at Jesus. If we don't want to change I suggest we don't spend much time looking at Jesus, because when we do, we change inside.

There's a well known story of the Cure d'Ars in France who went into his church day after day and found a farm worker sitting quietly looking at the crucifix behind the altar. Eventually he couldn't contain himself any longer and, sensitively, he asked the man what he was doing. 'Well,' said the farm worker, 'I sit here, and I look at him, and he looks at me, and we're happy together.'

Jesus didn't look at the devil, as it were, he looked at scripture. He answered each challenge with a verse from the scriptures that he knew so well. 'It is written, One doesn't live by bread alone.' 'It is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' 'It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

So there's a second clue to holiness – look at Jesus for a long time, and secondly, look at scripture, soak yourself in the beauty and truth of the Bible.

And then we read that Jesus, 'filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.' Here's a third clue to holiness, be filled with the Spirit. That might sound esoteric, but actually it's just a matter of asking and being open. Part of my prayers at the start of the day, very often, is that simple request, 'Fill me with your Spirit.' You can even *enact* that prayer. When we sit to pray its good to start with gentle breathing, in and out, to focus our attention before saying anything. And we can make that a breathing in of the Spirit to fill us, and a breathing out of the negativities that lie within us. In

with the good, out with the bad. In with the Spirit, out with the rubbish.

Holiness comes from long looking in the direction of Jesus, from soaking ourselves in the beauty of the Bible, and from being filled with the Spirit.

But there's one last thing about holiness – the philosopher said 'know yourself'; Jesus said 'don't try and be pious.' Holiness is earthy and honest. Holy people don't float 6 inches above ground. They're in touch with themselves, their motives, and the ordinary stuff of reality.

Two monks were walking along a track, talking away, when they got to a river, and there they found an attractive young woman trying to get across. She didn't know how to get across by herself, so one of the monks offered to carry her on his back as they forded the river. He duly did so and put her down on the other side, and the monks walked on in silence. After a mile or so, the other monk could keep quiet no longer and he began remonstrating with his friend for carrying a beautiful young woman like that, when they were supposed to keep themselves pure. 'Oh dear,' said the other, 'I put her down by the river. Are you still carrying her?'

Know yourself. Don't try and be pious but let your holiness be earthy and honest. Look at Jesus; look at scripture; be filled with the Spirit.

Then temptations will come and go - and we need not be afraid.