

TEMPTATION

(Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Mt 4:1-11)

The word 'Lent' means 'holy Spring'. In Dutch, and also in Afrikaans in South Africa, Spring is 'Lente'. Lent is a time for spiritual 'spring cleaning'. It is a time of preparation and turning anew to God and examining our lives. It is a time in which we seek to trust more fully in Jesus – hence the idea of fasting or giving up something for Lent, to remind ourselves that our trust is not in food and material things, but in Christ.

Speaking of giving up things, there is the story told about a man who was rather overweight and who decided to cut out the pastries he usually bought on his way to work. He even took a different route to work to avoid his favourite bakery. He was doing very well, but then one day his colleagues were very disappointed to see him arriving at work with a box full of pastries. He proceeded to explain, 'I was on my way to work today and through force of habit went on my old route past the bakery. I thought that it was perhaps a sign from God and asked him to confirm this by providing me with a parking space right in front of the bakery. And sure enough, on the fifth time round the block, there it was.'

Temptation tends to have negative connotations, doesn't it? But that's not how the Bible generally sees it. In the scriptures it's more about testing, rather than tempting. As when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. It was a testing of his loyalty, rather than a temptation to kill his son. It's rather like when metal is tested, to see if it will achieve the purpose for which it is intended. It's not to try and prove its weakness but rather to confirm its strength.

So too, temptation is not to make us bad, but to make us better; not to make us weaker, but to make us stronger. We can turn what Satan intends for bad into something good.

Apparently, there are no dangerous creatures in New Zealand (except their rugby players!) It is also the home of more flightless birds than any other country. It seems that there is a connection between these two facts. The birds never needed to fly away from danger, and so in time they lost their ability to do so. Temptation makes us exercise our spiritual wings. It's not all negative. Something that the evil one intends for evil we can use for good.

The other principle I want to speak about comes out of the temptations of Jesus. It is the principle regarding means and ends and about the ends not justifying the means.

The Devil presents Jesus with some attractive ends, or outcomes, but the means he suggests are not justifiable as far as Jesus is concerned. He begins by saying to Jesus in effect, 'If you're hungry, satisfy that hunger. After all you're the Son of God. You should take advantage of your position to benefit yourself.' But Jesus knows that is not the way He will order His life; He will not allow His bodily desires to determine His behaviour. He will trust His Father to provide what He needs.

Then too Satan says, 'You want to impress people and draw the crowds, don't you? What better way than jumping from the top of the temple and falling below unhurt.' Indeed, Jesus did want to draw people to hear His message and follow Him, but not for the wrong reasons. The means the Devil was proposing could not be justified even though the outcome was the same end that Jesus had in mind.

And finally, Satan says to Jesus, 'You want to be King and Ruler of the world. Just bow down to me and You can have your wish.' Again, the end was the same as that which Jesus wanted - the devotion of all humanity. But the means to get there was through the cross and not through a short-cut with the Devil's help.

For the Christian, the end, no matter how good it may be, can never justify the means, if those means are in any way counter to God's will and ways.

You are no doubt familiar with the practise of many evangelists who will invite people to make a commitment to Christ. They ask people to close their eyes and then to raise a hand if they want to give their lives to Christ. That's fine, but I know of a couple of preachers who will say, 'I see that hand, I see that hand', even when there are no hands raised. The preacher is only saying that to make people feel easier about raising their hands, knowing they are not the only ones doing so. The end is very commendable – seeking to bring people to a commitment to Jesus. But even such a good end does not justify a means that is less than honest.

We can do something similar if we encourage people to follow Jesus but use wrong means. For example, doing it with threats of hellfire if they refuse. Or maybe hiding the fact that following Jesus can involve sacrifices along the way and present the Christian life as a bed of roses.

What of more common, everyday examples? I think of something as simple as trying to get a child to behave by saying, 'If you don't behave, we're not going to go on holiday.' The end is fair enough, trying to get the child to behave themselves; but the means is unjustified, because we know very well, and the child probably knows too, that we're never going to cancel our holiday if the child continues to misbehave.

Another, more serious example. Let's say someone is desperate to get a certain job so that they can better provide for their spouse and children. That's a noble aim. But in order to increase their chance of getting the job they lie about something in their CV. The end is good, but that does not justify such means of accomplishing it.

As followers of Jesus, we can't only think of the end result, no matter how good that may be. We need to make sure that the means of getting there are good and honourable. If not, it means that we aren't trusting God for the outcome. Rather we feel that we must take things into our own hands. In effect we are saying to the Lord, 'I'm not sure I can trust you to bring about the best result; I better take charge of this.'

We face such temptations day by day; temptations to take the short cut; to take the easiest path to achieve our purpose; to take the route which we feel will guarantee the outcome we desire.

Lent invites us to journey with Jesus along the road to Calvary. It was a road that Jesus could have avoided, had He so chosen. But He didn't, and He invites us to travel that road of obedience and integrity, of truth and light, even though it may be a difficult one at times.

Jesus said, 'Enter in by the narrow gate, because the gate to destruction is wide and the road that leads to it is easy and there are many who travel it. But the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard, and there are few people who find it.'

The good news is that as we choose the narrow way, we have a fellow traveller who is beside us every step of the way; one who will say at the end, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; come and share in the joy of your Master.'