

*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Some of you may remember the parliamentary expenses scandal that took place in 2009, when a number of MPs were found to have misused their expense allowances, spending taxpayer's money on things like mortgage interest for second homes, gardening costs and heating for swimming pools. Of course these aren't the only questionable actions by people in power: in 2008, irresponsibility and greed by many in the banking and finance industry led to a world wide recession. And few can forget the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and the church's attempts to cover this up.

These are all examples of people who were willing to give up their integrity for personal gain or pleasure. Put another way, they faced temptation; and temptation won.

"Temptation" is not a word we hear very often these days, apart from praying at least once a week "Lead us not into temptation". And yet it is something we are faced with every day. I am tempted every time I look at a bar of chocolate or a packet of crisps. But on a more serious note, we all encounter choices about how to spend our time or our money, how to treat the environment, how to vote – issues which require us to decide which values and principles will guide our lives. And each such decision, small though it may be leads us towards or away from the person God wants us to become.

It was no different for Jesus. Today's gospel story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness reminds us that God does not take us anywhere that he isn't willing to go himself. Like us, Jesus was human, vulnerable, and subject to the same anxiety and self doubt that we all are. He also could have responded differently to Satan's temptations. He was free to choose, as we all are.

Jesus was tempted to do three things: To make bread out of stones, to give his soul to Satan in exchange for the kingdoms of the earth, and to show the world his greatness by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple. At first glance, such cosmic temptations seem unlike the general real-life trials that we may face, but in actual fact, Jesus' struggles were similar to many of ours: the desire for pleasure, the desire for wealth, and the desire for power. Such things are all too familiar for most of us.

Temptation comes when we judge others whose choices or actions differ from our own. Temptation rules when we look away from those affected by poverty, hunger or injustice. Temptation succeeds when we justify simple vanities, small lies, or questionable business practices, or become so absorbed in life's trappings that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless dark moments of our lives which would take over our souls.

Deliver us from evil. This is a prayer for the strength overcome Satan's work in the world. Like temptation, evil comes in many shapes and sizes. We saw it in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. We see it today in cyber bullying, attacks on ethnic or other minorities, and the indiscriminate bombing of innocent civilians.

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, there is a traditional community of people called the Amish, who are descended from a Swiss German Anabaptist sect. These people follow traditional Christian cultures and practices, simple living, plain clothes and no modern technology. They worship at home rather than in church buildings, and their leaders do not have degrees or licenses. Their faith is their living, and their way is peace.

That was, until October 2006, when a gunman entered an Amish school and shot ten girls, before taking his own life. The community came together and forgave him, attended his funeral, comforted his wife and continued to visit and help his family. The Amish people met evil that day, but they stood firm in their faith that God was with them. And by their faith, all were delivered.

Evil comes when we turn a blind eye to the playground bully who is making life miserable for our children. Evil rules when we sigh and turn the page on reports of child labour and human trafficking. Evil succeeds when we support rulers whose policies may suit ourselves and our associates but oppress the needy, the vulnerable and those who have no voice.

When we pray to be saved from temptation and evil, we are praying for strength to resist the many powers that work against God's Kingdom. Jesus resisted Satan, but he didn't vanquish him. Satan continues to show up again and again. His temptations are subtle, coercive and come in many disguises, often masquerading as freedoms granted by God or necessities that we cannot do without. But the biggest temptation is the same one that Jesus faced. It's the temptation to believe that we have all the answers, that we are the ones in control.

This is not a new situation. It goes right back to the beginning when a man and a woman in a garden wondered about tasting a piece of fruit. The preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor sums up the theme in this and other situations: She points out that we tend to think that these stories are about the temptation to be less than perfect human beings. But what they really are about is the temptation not to be human at all. What Adam and Eve, Jesus, and often we ourselves are tempted by is the chance to be like God.

That is the choice we face, whether to play at being God, or to trust God, whether to go our own way, or to follow him. When we pray "lead us not into

temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we acknowledge the reality of that choice. This is a prayer for protection, but more than that, it is a prayer for the strength to stay on God’s pathway whatever we may face. And it is a statement of trust that no matter what happens this week or this year or this century, ultimately God will deliver us and all of creation.

Every week, at the close of worship, the leader offers a blessing: “The blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you this day and always”. These words are a reminder that when the formal worship ends, we do not walk away from God. He is with us wherever we go, sometimes leading and sometimes carrying us through whatever challenges we may face in the days ahead.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden  
Benefice service during  
corona virus lock down  
5<sup>th</sup> July, 2020