

Genesis Ch 2 v15-17, Ch 3 v1-7

Romans Ch 5 v12-19

Matthew Ch 4 v1-11

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Father. Amen

Introduction>

The last time I stood here to preach, people were just embarking on their New Year's resolutions, and now we are embarking on our Lenten resolutions ... and I get to speak about "temptation".

We are all tempted from time to time - when we have choices to make.

Choosing to give up or take up things for Lent gives us:

- most importantly, a prompt to turn our thoughts to God, more often than we otherwise might.
- and secondly, a chance to practise making the "right" decision when we are tempted;

In this way what we do in Lent is a bit different from a New Year's resolution. This sermon will be a sort of "spiritual self-defence class" to help us through Lent!

Free will >

Let me start by saying isn't it fantastic that we are blessed with the free will to make resolutions, affect our own destiny. It is what makes us God's people not God's puppets. But given the ability to make choices we do have the ability to make some spectacularly bad choices starting back with Eve taking that apple from the tree.

We are faced with hundreds of choices every day, big and small, like:

- choose to eat one chocolate biscuit or the whole packet;
- choose to ignore a nasty comment from your brother, or lash out;

- choose to buy a new pair of shoes or make do with the old ones;
- choose to slump in front of the telly or read a verse from the bible...

I once heard that being a parent gives you a great insight into being God – you have created someone that you must keep safe, teach and help to grow, but must not control, because to do so would crush the very personality that you love.

My secondary school had as its motto “Therefore choose” from the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses is called upon to choose between life and death and is urged on by God to “Therefore choose life, love God”.

Like a good parent, God can only urge Moses or us make the right choice. He can't make the choice for us. Our humanity depends on the ability to make that choice ourselves.

The Devil>

One of the dangers in life that God teaches us about is the Devil. I'm not thinking here of a comicbook red imp with horns. It's a name that sums up the source of everything bad in the world - everything against God. We live in a world where a war is raging between good and evil. After Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, God is set to win, but until God's Kingdom comes on Earth the Devil, though defeated, can be expected to fight ever more fiercely.

And every time we are faced with an important choice, we should expect the Devil may try to tempt us to make the bad choice.

Christ>

And so Christ himself was tempted. To be fully human Christ had to have free will. He had to be able to walk away from the role he was destined for, or he would not be fully human. So Christ was tempted just as we are tempted, by the Devil.

Tempting Christ was never going to be easy so the Devil chose the moment he would have his best chance. Jesus would be physically weak after forty days fasting in the wilderness (I read recently about someone who did a 40-day-fast and lost 3 stone in that time) Jesus'

willpower would be at its lowest ebb.

And yet Jesus stands firm.

Resisting>

In the bible God teaches us what to do when tempted by the Devil. James says “Resist the Devil and he will flee from you”. Paul's message in Ephesians is to “stand firm” - courageous resistance is what is needed. We should wear the armour of God – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness and so on, and take just one defensive weapon “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”. And it is the word of God which Jesus uses to resist his three temptations.

- The devil suggests Jesus use his power to satisfy his own immediate hunger - “But he answered, it is written...” and quotes the bible
- The devil suggests Jesus show off his powers but Jesus says “Again it is written...” and quotes the bible
- The devil offers Jesus material wealth and power if he will worship him, but Jesus says “Away with you Satan! For it is written...” and quotes the bible

Modern parable>

Let's consider something nearer to home:

There is a teenager in Milford, sitting on the swings out there with his mates one evening. And his “friends” dare him to go down to the Coop and buy some cigarettes for them all, even though they aren't old enough. They flatter him, tell him he looks older than the rest of them and is sure to get away with it. They pressure him, tell him he can't be in their gang anymore if he won't dare to do something like this for them.

On his own he can only answer the temptation with an awkward collection of his own ill thought out fears: “I'm not sure I do look old enough, I don't think I'd actually like cigarettes, won't I get a police record if I'm caught?”. If he does that, sooner or later I predict his resistance will crumble and he will be on his way down to the shops.

But if his parents have got it right and taught him well, he might try: “No way, my Dad says only idiots waste their money on cigarettes.” It might not work every time but he stands a much better chance of avoiding the temptation - with a confident reply, referring to a higher authority.

When tempted by the Devil we can use the word of our Father in heaven. Refer to a higher authority – end the conversation with a simple, confident “No way, God says...”

Conclusion>

So the story of Jesus' temptation has reminded us of the way we can be tempted when we make important choices. We have been reminded how important it can be to know God's word, to resist these temptations.

Maybe your particular Lenten resolution is to curb a shopping habit. In that case you would do well to call to mind a verse from Luke where God says *“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”* - Something you can call to mind whenever you are tempted.

If like me you are avoiding rich and unnecessary foods like cakes, or chocolate or maybe alcohol then Timothy has something to offer in: *“We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”*

So I'm going to finish with a verse from Deuteronomy, which I was made to learn at school, and we can all take to heart and use when we are tempted. It will remind us of the choice God wants us to make. The Lord says *“Therefore choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him;”*

Our “spiritual self-defence” is all about knowing enough of God's word, that we remember His teaching when it matters. Perhaps during Lent you will take time to find some verses that could serve you well, in whatever ways you find yourself tempted.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.