

# Trials and Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

13<sup>th</sup> March 2011

*“To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. To die, to sleep, no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to: ‘tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there’s the rub: for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil<sup>1</sup>, must give us pause – there’s the respect that makes calamity of such long life. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely<sup>2</sup>, the pangs of disprized<sup>3</sup> love, the law’s delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes, when he himself might his quietus<sup>4</sup> make with a bare bodkin<sup>5</sup>? Who would fardels<sup>6</sup> bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to those we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pith and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.”<sup>7</sup>*

... Some of the most famous words in the English language. Words spoken by Shakespeare’s Hamlet as he struggles with overwhelming emotions of rage and revenge. Hamlet’s father, the King of Denmark has been murdered by Claudius who has assumed the throne to become the new king and, to make matters worse, he has married Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother.

Hamlet can’t decide how he should resolve his conflicting emotions. Should he just put up with his unfortunate lot in life? Should he just silently endure his pain? Should he just “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”? Or should he be more proactive? Should he do something about this terrible injustice? Should he “take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them”, in other words, kill Claudius?

Or, should he, he wonders, resolve his dreadful dilemma by simply killing himself? That would certainly end his “heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” That probably would be the easiest way. Just to drift off into a deep and eternal sleep. Ah, but what if the “sleep of death” brings nightmarish dreams filled with eternal pain and suffering? “Ay,” he thinks ruefully, “there’s the rub: for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.”

The story of Hamlet is in so many ways the story of a man struggling with great temptations. The temptation to go against his moral code and kill his enemy, or to take his own life, or simply to do nothing – to internalise his anger and suffer in silence, “to bear those ills” he has “than fly to those” he knows not of.

Jesus was also a man who in his life, struggled with great temptations, albeit of a different kind than those of Shakespeare’s character. Out in the desert, alone, for 40 days, at the beginning of his ministry, the man from Nazareth suffered terrible physical deprivations of every kind. During his ordeal, he was a prey to a whole host of the powers of evil who inflicted the worst agony possible upon him, promising him power, authority and worldly wealth by enticing him to do things such as turning stones into loaves, throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple and by offering him all the worldly kingdoms imaginable.<sup>8</sup>

We don’t get the same sense in the biblical narrative – as we do in Shakespeare’s drama – of the intense inner conflict that Jesus experienced. We don’t get the same sense of Jesus agonising, questioning himself, weighing up different possibilities against each other in the same way as Hamlet did. But we can be well assured that Jesus experienced an even greater anguish of heart and mind, an even greater dark night of the soul, as he dealt with the agonising temptation that he had to face. In Jesus’ case it was not that he was tempted to take his own life, to commit suicide. That was not an option. But the temptation Jesus faced was in so many ways a temptation to commit spiritual suicide, by giving in to the power of evil, by succumbing to the forces of the secular world, and abandoning his God-given mission.

Thankfully, we ordinary people never have to face temptation to the same extreme degree or in the same challenging way that Jesus faced it in his time. Thankfully, we ordinary people never have to face temptation on a similar scale to that of fictional characters in drama, nor those in high profile jobs of great power and influence. Nevertheless, no matter who we are, we all have to deal with temptations of different sorts and descriptions in the midst of our everyday lives.

Maybe it’s to do with food ... An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his diet very seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favourite bakery.

One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him but he just kept smiling despite the jibes and barbs of criticism. “This is a special coffee cake,” he explained, “I

accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of beautiful cakes. I prayed, “Lord, if you want me to have one of these delicious coffee cakes, let there be a sign.” And sure enough, the 8<sup>th</sup> time I drove round the block, a parking spot suddenly appeared – right in front of the bakery!”<sup>9</sup>

Maybe our temptation has to do with clothes ... A woman once told her minister she had a terrible weakness for buying new clothes. So he advised her that, whenever the urge came on, she should just say, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” and the temptation would go away.

Next Sunday, the woman appeared in church, dressed in the most gorgeous outfit that had heads turning and voices chattering. As she shook hands with the pastor after the service, he asked her what had happened. The woman told him his advice did not work. “I was in the changing room at the department store, trying on the dress and was just about to buy it but I said, ‘No, no, get thee behind me, Satan!’ ... Then I distinctly heard a voice over my shoulder saying, ‘Actually, it looks quite nice from the back!’”<sup>10</sup>

Yes, we all, no matter who we are, have to deal with temptations of different kinds. None of us are immune. As Christians, we are faced by even greater temptations because we are targeted by the powers of evil on account of our faith, by reason of the fact we have associated ourselves with the highest form of good in the person of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest temptations we 21st century disciples have to face, I believe, is to compromise our identity as Christ’s people. To forget who we are so we might achieve some more immediate, some more self-serving and more self-satisfying, benefit.

This is constantly the challenge we face as people of faith. We constantly succumb to the temptation of forgetting we are Christians. So we say the harsh word rather than react with compassion. We turn a blind eye to the unethical stuff that’s happening at work. We laugh at the racist joke told at the party. We relish visiting guilt-trips on our family. We downplay the effects of gambling forgetting those whose lives are wrecked by it. We minimise the effects of alcohol to justify our own indulgent behaviour.

By these, and many other means, we act in ways contrary to our Christian calling. We forget who we are. And to whom we belong. We forget who has bought us. And the price that has been paid. This all makes it by far the greatest temptation we face – the temptation to compromise our identity as followers of Jesus. To lose ourselves in order to gain the world.

Isn’t it strange that we pay so much attention these days to the dangers of “identity theft” – of having our birth certificate or credit cards stolen – and having someone criminally assume our social identity? But we do so little to prevent loss of our spiritual identity? To prevent the loss of who we are at the very inner core of

our being?

Thankfully, of course, God gives us the power to overcome the temptation to lose our identity as his people. And he has done it through Jesus Christ. Through what he achieved 20 centuries ago by having his Son go to the Cross. There, on Calvary, he defeated the source of such temptations – the force of evil – with a cosmic detonation that has reverberated right throughout history ever since.

To understand what God did back then and how it affects us today, think of what it would be like to look through a telescope at an exploding supernova millions of light years away in a far-off galaxy. The explosion of the dying star happened long, long ago back across the vast aeons of time. But the power of this blast still lives on and its reality is still seen today, even though the precipitating event is now long past and gone. Similarly, though the event of the Cross has long since disappeared into the annals of history, the awesome force, by which God destroyed the satanic battalions of evil that pitted themselves against Christ, is still very much a present reality. Its ever-dynamic power is still very much at work, overcoming the residual present-day effects of evil wherever they might manifest themselves in today’s world.

Which all means that we can take heart as we daily struggle against all temptations but, particularly, as we do battle with the temptation to compromise our Christian identity. We can be assured without question that our Lord and Saviour daily gives us the power to be the Christian people he has called us to be – the Christian people we want to be. The forces that would tempt us to do otherwise, to become someone or something less than we are, to sell our souls for worldly gain, cannot finally win because God is already the victor. And through him we are victors too.

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<sup>1</sup> A poetic term that means the troubles of daily life and the strife and suffering of the world. It is used in the sense of a burden to be carried or abandoned. Source: Wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> Contempt

<sup>3</sup> Scorned

<sup>4</sup> Release from life. Death.

<sup>5</sup> Knife. Dagger.

<sup>6</sup> Burdens

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Act III, Scene I*

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>9</sup> Lee Gries, “Overcoming Temptation”, *Taking The Risk Our Of Dying*, CSS Publishing Co., 1997

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.