

*Matthew 4: 1-11*

*Romans 5: 12-19*

*“Temptation is the norm if we’re truly alive and faced with making choices”*

Today is designated by the Church as the First Sunday of Lent -recalling the 40 days Jesus spent in solitude in the wilderness. The Gospels record that whenever Jesus had a problem to face he spent some time alone with the Father and I’m sure we’ll all be familiar with this scenario. Don’t we all find that, occasionally, we need times of stillness and quiet to examine our situation, to work out our own feelings and to decide what we should do next to arrive at our ultimate goal

How do we approach such situations? Well, first we have to ask ourselves, “What are, or should be,our priorities?” This familiar Gospel story is about choices. Some choices are small, while others can be life-changing.

About 20 years ago, I chose to spend a few days in Fontgombaud Abbey, near Le Blanc. I was with a French friend who was facing an uncertain future in both his business and his personal life and wanted to reflect on his options.

While we spent some time walking and talking in the grounds of the Abbey, our daily routine, starting at 5.00am, included eating 3 meals with the resident monks, and attending up to 7 religious services each day with them. No TV or radio, no distractions! So in our spartan individual cells, most of the day and the evening, was devoted to reflection, reading and prayer.

I found the experience both physically and mentally exhausting, despite the absence of the busyness of my usual daily agenda. But I have no doubts that those few days enabled me to clarify much of my own muddled thinking about the future.

Matthew tells us that Jesus chose to be” led by the Spirit into the wilderness” -to open himself completely to the will and mighty power of God. He fasts, to prepare himself for the occasion, then is led to a place of testing, where he has to face up to the evil all around him, and to grapple with his demons, rather than try to ignore them. As the Son of God, now in genuine human form, how best could he achieve his Father’s goals?

As the Son of God, what about his status? “You’ve been fasting, why not just turn these stones into loaves of bread? That’ll cure your hunger and impress people”, suggests the devil. Don’t we all harbour some curiosity about what others think of us; about whether we’re judged to be a success or a failure, a winner or a loser? As Christians, do we respond to such anxiety by trying to do showy things to impress other people to speak well of us? Or are we prepared to simply get on with things, receiving any status through God’s grace.

Then the choices offered by the devil involve power. We may not think we’re very powerful at all. However, every one of us has personal power.

For instance, we have the power to choose to help someone in need, or to ignore them; to forgive someone who has hurt us, or to let them carry on suffering by ignoring them.

We probably all know something of the power games which go on in groups of which we are members. Sadly this includes churches. The choice for Christians is, do we use whatever knowledge or skills we have been gifted with, as the rest of the world often does, manipulatively, selfishly, greedily, or do we devote ourselves to the greater power of God and regularly look for his guidance?

What Jesus constantly did was to look beyond the situation facing him to Scripture, with its positive guidance and reassurance. If we try to battle with temptations toe-to-toe, we'll be exhausted, and ill-equipped for more positive discipleship -and we'll probably lose anyway. But if, like Jesus, we look beyond the presenting issue to a more attractive alternative, we can leave temptations behind us.

Too often, we fail because we are filled with self-doubt, and doubt in God- quite often its because we haven't spent time getting to know ourselves - or God!

Temptation is nice! If it wasn't, we wouldn't be tempted. In English, "to tempt" usually means "to lead astray"; here in Matthew it means "to test" and doesn't have any connotations of good or evil. We all need times when we test our aims and our priorities, or we would simply "drift" from one thng to another.

Temptation (testing) is not to do with fantasising about what we can do, but rather its about facing up to our own potential and ability -and seeing that we use them appropriately. We are tested, tempted, through our thoughts and our feelings - and there's nothing wrong with this. Temptation shows we are alive! But choice matters.

How we use our God-given powers and freedom matters.

Where we turn from God to devote ourselves and our time to something else, money, possessions, sport, food or whatever, as Christians we are casting ourselves adrift.

Lent is a time for reviewing our lifestyle, repentance, God's forgiveness, and for each of us to discover a new relationship with him.

Let's make a real effort to talk with, and listen to, our Father and, in rediscovering a personal relationship with him, learn to live at peace with ourselves and each other.

John Matthews.