

First Sunday of Lent

Fr Jonathan Jong

Gen 2.7-9, 3.1-7

Matthew 4.1-11

Old Scratch seems to have lost his knack by the time he gets to Jesus in the wilderness. Like a dog chasing cars, who doesn't know what to do once he's caught one. It's just him and God's only begotten Son, now with the newly added vulnerability of being human. He knows human vulnerability well, our old adversary the devil: he has been a long time walking about.

And he starts off strong enough, I suppose. He observes that Jesus is hungry, and suggests that he commands stones to become loaves of bread. This is a good trick, not in the sense that it is a subtle one, but in the sense that it is a trick based on the goodness of things. Bread is good (people afflicted with coeliac disease notwithstanding). There is certainly no evil inherent in turning stones into bread: under different circumstances, it would be an excellent thing to do. Christians, we quite like the turning of one substance

into another. Meagre amounts of fish and bread into incredible amounts thereof to feed the hungry. Water into wine to sustain the joy of a wedding. Wine into blood, though that's not quite the same thing. Anyway, the point is: the devil is here tempting Jesus to do, as it were, a good thing.

Two good things. *If you are the Son of God*, he says, *command these stones*. If p , then q . And p : Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore q , this is an opportunity for truth-telling, which is, like bread, also good. He could, of course, reject the imperative conditional. Jesus is not obliged to accept the devil's command. Some might say he is obliged to *disobey* the devil's command, but a blanket rule to refuse to do what the devil says is bound to be easily exploitable. Anyway, the point is: the devil is here encouraging Jesus to be himself, his bread-making, hunger-satiating self. Or that's what Jesus can tell himself.

It doesn't come to that: Jesus doesn't take the bait. And then the devil goes off the rails, as if flustered by failure. He tries to persuade Jesus to fling himself off the top of a building and then to bow down and

worship him, the devil, as if either of these were even remotely desirable things to do. They are, in other words, not good, which is why the devil needs to sweeten the deal somehow. First, he tries the imperative conditional thing again, but it worked no better this time than it did earlier. Then, he dangles before Jesus the kingdoms of the world, which is spectacularly misinformed, seeing as the whole world is God's who made it and keeps it in being.

Heaven forbid that I dare to teach the devil to suck eggs: but he should've stuck to his first strategy. It is his very oldest trick, after all, this thing of tempting folks towards lesser goods. Consider the incident in the garden with the fruit of that tree in the middle, made by God, and therefore good by definition. But good also because of its effects: everlasting life and knowledge, good things, surely. Eat the good fruit, is the serpent's advice, which would not be bad advice were it not for the fact that there are greater goods than choice produce or fresh bread, even than longevity and knowledge and authenticity.

All of which is to say that the temptations we should watch out for are those towards lesser goods to the exclusion of greater ones. Those are the sins that are easiest to justify to ourselves, if not to other people too.

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People like to think that moral choices are between good on one hand and evil on the other. Maybe it's a comforting thought, that when we're faced with moral decisions, it will be easy to discern and make the right choice. Maybe—and here's the dark side—it also helps us to feel morally superior over those who make the wrong choices: and according to this binary logic, the converse of being on the side of the angels is that those who disagree with us must be demonic.

This has always seemed to me to be a disastrously insipid view of the moral world. And so, for years, I thought instead of moral choices as compromises between more or less terrible options. Our job is to go with the least bad of them. I still think that this analysis goes quite a long way; and I find confirmation for it whenever I tune into the political news. And

besides having the virtue of being empirically adequate, this view also has the benefit of being compassionate to the extent that it is forgiving of moral imperfection, which is after all inevitable.

The trouble is not that this is unduly pessimistic: things are very often morally grey, even if we admit certain regions of black and white. The trouble is that it is a satanic view of things, in that it cedes too much ground to the devil. In particular, it surrenders greyness to the devil, unable to perceive the light necessarily present if darkness is to have shades. And why should the devil have our imperfect but earnest negotiations of the moral world?

Why, furthermore, should the devil have the lesser goods, as if they weren't good at all? No one thinks that the devil owns everlasting life, the knowledge of good and evil, truth-telling, fruit trees, and freshly baked bread: but we do let ourselves think that lots of other things are *naughty*, to be enjoyed only as guilty pleasures, if ever. We jest, of course, but we don't really, which is how people develop psychological complexes about food and alcohol and the relationship

between work and leisure and any number of mundane things, which must make the devil grin whenever we fret about them instead of getting to more important things in the world.

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The temptations to watch out for are those towards lesser goods to the exclusion of greater ones.

I submit to you that our Lenten fasting is an exercise in this watching out, is practice at setting aside lesser goods for greater ones. We abstain from drink to enjoy the clear-mindedness of sobriety. We abstain from rich foods to enjoy the vigour of health. We abstain from social media to enjoy our friends and families face-to-face, paying and receiving due—perhaps overdue—attention. And of course, the surplus time and energy and money, saved from our temporary abstinences, can be put to good use. Christian *giving up* necessarily involves *giving*, which is why Lent is a time of almsgiving as well as fasting: the two are conjoined, and have always been in Christian moral imagination.

Abstinence is not so much about austerity as it is about altruism, which is a most excellent good.

We know at least that *Lenten* abstinence is not about austerity in part because Lenten fasting is punctuated with *feasting*, not only on *Laetare Sunday* but indeed every Sunday. The period from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday make forty-six days, which requires the six Sundays in between to be excluded to make a fast of forty days, like our Lord's in the wilderness. This oscillation between fasting and feasting is a reminder that the things from which we are fasting might be good things or, like all created things, have some good in them. That is to say that we can perceive providence through these lesser goods; they are, in their fitting place, occasions for joy and thanksgiving. And when this is not so—that is, when we discover that the things from which we are fasting are *not* good things; perhaps we know even now, having just decided to give them up—we would be right to give them up, not just for Lent, but forever. In this way too, is our Lenten discipline practice for a better life.

For the rest of us, however, Lent reminds us of the fitting place of things in which we rightly take finite pleasure: reminds us that our use and enjoyment of things—of chocolate and coffee and crisps—all point towards the source of all good things, the goal of our deepest and truest desires, who is to be infinitely enjoyed. After Lent, most of us will return to enjoying most of the things we gave up, and we will hopefully return to them with a new mind. It is not just that we will emerge on Easter Sunday with a healthier relationship to things, or a firmer commitment to moderation, though these would be welcome. My hope and prayer is that the return of these lesser goods, these simple pleasures, will be for us no less an occasion for worship than the return in our liturgies of the Gloria and that other word we may not now speak. And that evermore, they will be signs for us, present glimpses, of God's goodness.

It is a tall order, perhaps, for material things to take on such spiritual significance. But then, what could be more Christian?

Amen.

