

THIS WEEK'S HOMILY FROM FATHER JIM

First Sunday of Lent: *Temptation – a time to choose.*

1st Reading: Deuteronomy 26:4-10 : *God's people profess what he did for them;*

2nd Reading: Romans 10:8-13 : *Professing the Faith sincerely;*

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13 : *Jesus is tempted about the use of his powers.*

What a turbulent run-up to the start of Lent! February brought storms and heavy rain; this last week, we have seen Europe plunged into war again – with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (By the time you read this, everything may have changed since I typed these notes.) This weekend's readings reflect two ideas: the Old Testament Law-book (Deuteronomy) and St Paul's Letter to the Romans both stress the importance of expressing to others facts that we believe to be true. The gospel shows Jesus being tempted to misuse the powers he was given by his Father, in order to make his life easier in different ways. In doing so, he would have contradicted the Father's will, at least as he understood it. I think the two ideas are linked, although this is not obvious at first sight.

I suggest that beliefs DO matter. There are many these days who dispute this, and say: "Well, as long as your feelings are in the right place, then what you believe is less important." One of the reasons the Old Testament Jews went off the rails so often was that they ceased to believe fully in the presence of the God who had saved them from slavery (about 1250 BC) and had helped them to acquire the Promised Land. They took a lot for granted, and lost the sense of their God being with them. This in turn led to their copying the behaviour of the other peoples in the area: materialism, child-sacrifice, worship of pagan gods, marital infidelity, etc. etc. Read any of the great prophets, and it's clear that the cause of their loss of morality was the weakness of their faith. I know it's a point that I probably repeat too often, but the three basic 'ingredients' of any religion are beliefs, behaviour and worship. If any of the three are missing, then our 'religion' is weakened – almost to the point of descending into superstition. This seemed to have happened in the Old Testament, and (I fear) it's happening today.

Let's apply this to the gospel story of Jesus' temptations. If you read it straight through, you may notice how similar it is to the story of the temptation of the woman (Eve) in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-7). The Devil (or Serpent in Genesis) makes an opening like "If you are the Son of God..." or "If you eat this fruit...", then something nice could happen. In other words, a choice is offered, based on one interpretation of the facts. In the Genesis story, the "something nice" would be the opening of their eyes to all 'truth' – in that they could choose for themselves what would be right or wrong. In the gospel, Jesus could use his status (it was true: he WAS God's Son) to ease his hunger, by turning stones into bread. Jesus' second temptation was to be a political messiah – the "truth" being that the Devil had control of world power anyway, and the Jews were desperate for a leader to free them from the Romans. The third temptation was the most subtle: to force his Father to save him from death by a spectacular leap from the temple parapet (think of Grey's Monument in Newcastle). This public event would be a proof of his divinity, and would make people likely to believe him totally. Again, it was based on the truth of Psalm 90 (91 in non-RC Bibles) that God's angels would shield him from any harm.

I know that the gospels put all three temptations into a single event, but I suspect that they would have been with Jesus all through his ministry. The urge to have a comfortable life, or to gain a political following, by using his sense of being divine, must have been overwhelming at times. On the other hand, I wonder how often he may have been tempted to use miraculous power to compel people to accept his religious message (or at least, make faith much easier for them)? There's no mention of the temptation to 'sins of the flesh' – or ordinary human weakness – but I assume they were part of his human life also.

Temptation is not the same as sinning. All of us are 'tempted' to do or say different things – in that we have serious choices to make every so often. However, modern society often tells us either: that the choice doesn't exist, because we are already conditioned to act in a certain way; or: that little of it matters anyway. I think that, deep down, we know this isn't true. We do have beliefs about who we are, and what our moral 'duty' is, and that this duty matters. Having self-control is important to what we believe ourselves to be.

This last bit is where Lent comes in. The church's language ('spiritual warfare'; 'cleansing'; etc) can seem very old-fashioned at times, but it still makes sense. True, Jesus did save us from sin & death; true, faith & conscience are the main things in our religion; but those facts don't take away the belief that we have a real part to play in our own Christian salvation. The next six weeks should be a time for examining ourselves honestly, and doing something about our spiritual life. Whether we give things up (for more self-control) or do extra instead, is up to each of us. I would just ask that we try to do something. Millions (not least in Ukraine) would love our freedom to make major choices.

Fr Jim Dunne.