

## First Sunday in Lent

### Sermon Text – Mark 1:9-15

**Theme:** “*Temptation Conquered*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Temptation is not at the centre of a Christian’s faith – to say so would be silly. But together with faith always comes temptation, which is Satan’s weapon to lure faithful Christians away from the Triune God. This has been humanities story since the serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say...”

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

### The first temptation

In our confirmation classes we describe the relationship enjoyed by Adam and Eve to our Heavenly Father and how they were in perfect unity with him. There was no veiled presence but rather they enjoyed his company face to face.

Having created the world and all that was in it, God gave Adam and Eve the privilege and responsibility to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion ... over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:28) Humanity wasn’t to abuse this divine work but was to take its part in the ordering God’s creation. From the beginning of time God was working through humanity.

Together with these instructions for the care of all earthly creation, God gave Adam and Eve completely free reign over creation with *one* exception. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen 2:16-17) Human nature being what it is, we focus on this one restriction when the reality is that God had given humanity the greatest *freedom*. Adam and Eve had it all, without any cares or concerns – just existence in God’s garden with the joyful responsibility of caring for what God had freely given them.

Into this idyllic scenario slithers Satan in the guise of a serpent. His temptation to Adam and Eve is clever because it is subtle. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to say “no” to those things which are out and out wrong? Our interest may be sparked and we may be tempted for a brief moment, but it is easy to say “no” because there is no doubt that it is wrong. But Satan’s most effective temptations come dressed up in subtlety. To Eve he said, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden?’” (Gen 3:1) See how there is enough truth to force further consideration, but already there is a small change from God’s restriction to just one tree to Satan’s suggestion of *any* tree.

Well you know how the rest of the story goes – both Eve and Adam who was right there with her all along succumb to the temptation and sin entered into the world.

The extent of damage can be seen in God’s walking through the garden looking for Adam and Eve. We often think of God looking for his people to punish them, when really God is wanting to spend time with them. But it is Adam and Eve who have hidden themselves from God’s presence. In their fall into sin, they have recognised they are naked and exposed in their sinfulness and they are the ones who cut themselves off from God.

We might be distracted by all manner of questions that come from this story. “Why did God put the tree in the garden if he didn’t want people to eat the fruit?” “Why did God allow Satan into the garden?” “Why do we still suffer the effects of this original sin, we weren’t the ones who dropped our guard?” All of these questions and others like them are valid. I’m cranky and disappointed in Adam and Eve – but we don’t know the answers and none of our questions change the fact that things are the way they are. Humanity now has to deal with the reality of our broken relationship with God because Adam and Eve gave in to the very first temptation of Satan.

### Jesus’ temptation

All it took was for the first people to fall into sin for all humanity to be tainted with the guilt of this original sin. The problem for people is that they were now cut off from God’s presence. It’s like there is an unbridgeable gulf between two cliffs, we are on one side (and its not the good side), with God on the other. If sin entered the world through one man, God chose for sin to be defeated through one man, through Jesus Christ.

Mark's gospel describes Jesus' temptation in brief but compelling circumstances. To appreciate the importance of his temptation, it helps to position it with what else was happening for him at that time. Remember that Jesus has just been baptised by John in the Jordan River. John baptised a baptism of repentance but Jesus had no need of repentance because he was the only person who never sinned. But because he was baptised, Jesus has given us the means to be joined with him in our baptism.

Now immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted. And following his temptation, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God. Jesus joins us to himself, he endures our temptation, and he shares the good news that we are once more able to live in God's presence.

So if the events surrounding Jesus' temptation are important in our relationship with God, what did it mean for Jesus to be tempted? Remember that the punishment for Adam and Eve was death as a result of eating the forbidden fruit. They didn't physically die straight away, but they were cut off from their creator – they died an immediate spiritual death the moment they were banished from the Garden of Eden. So for humanity to be restored to God once more, the sins of people need to be atoned for (or paid for) and this would take the death of a man who bore *no* sin to die in the place of others.

This means that even before Satan begins, Jesus understood that if he resisted his temptations he would die so others could live. Talk about pressure! Mark doesn't describe in detail the manner in which Satan tempted Jesus other than, "he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan." (Mk 1:13) Whilst Mark doesn't give much detail, you do get a sense of Jesus being constantly tempted and niggled by the devil. He was *being* tempted. When we add this to the detail provided by Matthew and Luke's accounts, we get a picture of high pressure being constantly applied by Satan to get Jesus to give in to the temptations of this world. He never gave in.

You'll remember that Adam and Eve had the one temptation in the midst of great freedom, and they gave in at the first chance. Jesus endured great torment but he never buckled under. No matter what temptations thrown up by Satan, they only serve to remind us of the emptiness of his claims. Matthew and Luke describe several of the temptations including all the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus would bow down and worship him. The lie is revealed for they were never Satan's to give as they *already belonged to Jesus*.

Satan's temptations are always hollow, they are always false and whilst we might give in to them, Jesus never did.

### **Temptation conquered**

St Paul wrote in Romans, "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." (Rom 5:12) If humanity were left in this state, we would be without hope. Instead God promised humanity a saviour who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and this came through Jesus Christ. Paul continues, "the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." (Rom 5:15)

This is the freedom that we now enjoy. Temptation has been conquered by Christ and through his perfect sacrifice on the cross we are forgiven for the times we have given in to the temptations in our lives. Does this mean we will no longer have temptation knocking on our door? No, of course not. We will fight temptation as long as we are alive in this fallen world. But don't be afraid of it. Remember that Satan has no interest in those who don't put their trust in God. He doesn't need to win people to his side, he only has to have them take their eyes from Christ alone. So if you are being tempted, know that you have faith and the Holy Spirit inside you, working hard to keep you in God's own presence.

And when you give in to the temptations that keep arising, be joyful that we are not alone and helpless, but that we can ask God to forgive and he does so because of Jesus' perfect record which he holds up in our place. So what does this mean for you? Don't keep dragging the baggage of old sins around with you. This is Satan's first and boldest temptation for Christians – "Did God really say... you are forgiven?" Well the answer is, "Yes he did." When you were baptised and whenever you ask him to forgive you. Live now as a forgiven child of God and trust in him alone to lead and guide you. Amen.