

First Sunday of Lent A - And lead us not into Temptation, but deliver us from Evil, Amen
February 26, 2023.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to be our strength and guide when we’re faced with temptation and sin. The realities of temptation and sin are very apparent in each of our readings this Sunday.

In the first reading in Genesis (2:7-9, 3:1-7) we have one of the most well-known, often quoted, and unfortunately usually misunderstood Old Testament stories. We’ve heard this since we were children. A serpent who is more crafty than any other wild animal, tricks Eve into eating the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and Eve gets Adam to take a bite too. Instead of dying, as God proclaimed would happen, Adam and Eve realized they were naked and eventually got kicked out of Paradise. If only they had obeyed God, we would all still be living there and life would be perfect. It seems unfair that we have to suffer for what Adam and Eve did. The great secret of the story of temptation in the Garden of Eden is that God did not abandon Adam and Eve. The promise echoing through the centuries since Paul preached it is that even if we fall into the temptation of forgetting God, Grace will not forget us.

There are a number of confusions with these stories. To begin with, where did we get the idea the fruit was an apple? According to Genesis, even the whole Bible, there is nothing to show the forbidden fruit was an apple. However In many Western Christian art, the fruit is commonly depicted as the apple. This may have originated as a Latin pun: by eating the *mālum* (apple), Eve contracted *malum* (evil). The forbidden apple is often seen to have something to do with sex. Sex gets the label of being evil in many traditions. God wants to bless us. When he says we should or should not do something, it's always with this blessing in mind. But the devil tries to convince us that God's commandments are unreasonable and cruel. That's what he did with Adam and Eve, and he hasn't changed tactics. The Church consistently reminds the world that human sexuality is intrinsically linked to a special kind of love that springs up between spouses, intrinsically linked to new life, to children. But the original sin damaged our common sense, so God's commandments and Church teaching remind us of the meaning of sexuality. But the devil says that it is cruel to claim that sexuality has meaning, because that puts limits on it. And so he tempts us to commit adultery, sex before marriage, and homosexual unions, ,,, turning loving, human procreation into artificial contraception, abortion. This story Adam and Eve teaches us that temptation and sin are part of human nature. They’re part of our nature because we’ve been given the gift of free will.

The mention of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brings up another interesting point. Notice that it says good and evil. St. Augustine of Hippo taught that the "tree" should be understood both symbolically and as a real tree – similarly to Jerusalem being both a real city and a figure of Heavenly Jerusalem. **Augustine’s thought is that “the fruits of that tree were not evil by themselves, because everything that God created “was good” (Genesis 1:12). It was disobedience of Adam and Eve, who had been told by God not to eat off the tree (Genesis 2:17), that caused disorder in the creation, thus humanity inherited sin and guilt from Adam and Eve's sin.”** This whole story is so much more wonderful when we understand what the story is really saying to us. Then of course we need to consider our other readings, lest we think that the story ends with ***“and they knew that they were naked.”***

This Sunday’s gospel reading from Matthew (4:1-11) is also another of those really well-known and often told stories about Jesus. This is a favourite from Sunday school days because it’s so visual. We can picture the desert and Jesus being almost dead after 40 days of fasting. The tempter tries to get Jesus to turn stones to bread. That would be a great trick. But Jesus doesn’t give in. What Jesus does is remind the tempter that God is the authority, that God has the true power. Only God is worthy of humankind's worship. So, in Jesus we find our model, our guide in how to resist temptation for one thing, but even more importantly, that when we do sin we are always given the chance to repent.

In the second reading St. Paul tells the Romans, and us, just as sin and death came into the world through the actions of one man, Adam, grace and life has come into the world through the actions of another, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12, 17-19). What Christ has brought into the world, His Grace, is infinitely more powerful than the hideous power of sin. Saint Paul compares the Saviour, whom elsewhere he calls 'the final Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45), with the Adam of the Genesis story. There are many things these three readings teach us, but we might focus solely on faithfulness. If Adam and Eve had been faithful to what God asked of them, like Jesus, they would have been able to resist the temptation to sin. The consequence of their sinfulness was that they saw very clearly their nakedness, their humanity. If we're honest, when we sin, don't we know deep down and quite clearly our own weakness? That's when we must not lose hope. Yes, the consequence of Adam and Eve's sin was to lose the garden. Our sinfulness causes us to lose our balance, our peace of heart. Jesus's ministry was to call us back to faithfulness showing us how much God loves us. God loves us enough to become like us, to die to redeem us, and to rise to bring us back into a loving relationship with Him.

Brothers and sisters, like Jesus, we can fight the temptation of the world. The temptations that come from the evils are continuous and relentless. It often happens that once a person finds freedom from some diabolical influence and from some sin, they later fall back into that sin as they become lax. Therefore, we must always remember that once we overcome some sin, temptation or oppression, we must perpetually remain vigilant so that we do not fall back into these evils. Ongoing vigilance is essential if we are to remain firmly grounded on the road to virtue and holiness. We live for our Heavenly Father, not for ourselves. The goal of our lives is to live for God. We have bought into the Kingdom, not sold our souls to the world, or to the devil. Lent is a wonderful time to re-read these Scripture stories, to remember what we've learned and what they still teach us. Lent is a time to pray for metanoia, the Greek word for a change of heart and life, a renewal of faith. **"Happy are we whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!"** Amen