

INTRODUCTION: Preaching at the start of Lent: Jesus' Temptations aren't ours

I've got to be honest: I don't really like preaching on the first Sunday in Lent, on Jesus' temptations.

Who does the service rota around here anyway? Oh, yeah ... (Note: "put Geoff down for this next year".)

Why do I find this difficult to preach on? Well, because we read the story of Jesus' temptations, just as we are beginning a season when we're encouraged to *resist* the things we find tempting.

But Jesus' temptations in the wilderness are in some ways just that – *Jesus'*, very much to do with who he was and what he'd come to do.

I can be lured towards wrongdoing in many ways, but not by someone saying, "Rick, if you are the Son of God, do this ...". Delusions of divinity, at least, are not among my many failings. So this would not be a temptation tactic worth trying on me.

1. Jesus'

But maybe a good one to try on Jesus. The very word "if" suggests he needs to prove himself, maybe *to* himself; did Jesus sometimes doubt himself? Perhaps.

Or at least wouldn't it have been easy to prove himself to the crowds with the odd miracle: how about a bungee jump off the temple tower, without a bungee, but relying on angelic rescue?

There are actually two temptations in one here: first, Jesus resisted using his power like magic, to attract people cheaply, without changing their hearts.

Second, he chose not to use his power to save himself: no angels to break his fall now, and in three years he'll resist this temptation again, telling his disciples at this arrest not to fight:

'Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?' (Matthew 26.53)

... which he does not do. Neither then nor now will he command angels to rescue him, though he *is* the Son of God.

He will not use his power to save himself, nor to serve himself. What would be so wrong in making some rock buns, or – rather – buns out of rocks? No. He is here in the wilderness to practice the discipline he'll soon need, and he'll see it through, rising above his hunger, not submitting to it.

2. Jesus', not ours

Some of that is going on here, I think.

But these temptations are particular to Jesus, with his purpose and his power. They are not mine. Or yours, I suspect.

So maybe preaching on this is hard because one of the things I think I have understood about sermons is that they need to seem relevant. Sermons often work better when the preacher finds real parallels between what's happening in the Bible and our experience, questions, challenges.

So, if a sermon is about Christ on the cross, and the preacher says, “When Jesus, in such pain, cannot feel his Father’s presence, and asks why he has forsaken him ... have you ever, in a time of pain yourself, felt that?” And many of us think, “Well, yes, I really have. Jesus has been there, where I’ve been.”

Or if a sermon’s about baptism, and the preacher says, “Have you ever been filthy, maybe after a sports match, or falling over on a long walk, covered in mud, and just longed to soak in the bath and be washed clean? And have you ever felt an inner muddiness, and longed for your heart to be washed clean like that?” And many of us will think, “Yes – I’ve wanted that bath; and, yes, I have longed for that sense of forgiveness and a fresh start too.”

Good sermons often work that way. We can see where the Bible’s story or its meaning meet us in experience.

Well, let me try this, then, for today: so folks, you know what it’s like, when you find yourselves high up on a mountain, as if you can see the whole world, and – what do you know? – old Nick, Satan himself, pops up beside you? “It could all be yours”, he says, picking burrs out of his tail. “All you have to do is a quick bit of devil-worship. No big deal. Whaddya say?” Ah, we’ve all been there, haven’t we?

No, we have not! This is not our experience. It’s one reason I find it hard to preach on Jesus’ temptations at the start of Lent.

3. Tempting – how not to do it

Another is this: for us, Satan does not dress up in his best red, with horns, tail and trident, and present the deal straight like this; not in my experience.

He's called "the Deceiver" in scripture, and not without reason.

In *Macbeth*, Macbeth and Banquo, fresh from victory in battle, meet the three witches, who tell Macbeth he will become Thane of Cawdor and then King. The next thing that happens is a messenger arrives telling him he has been proclaimed ... Thane of Cawdor, replacing the traitor who had that title.

Banquo warns his friend:

"Oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us
In deepest consequence."

In other words, you may not get to see the contract clearly, and this could be devilry. But Macbeth is now hooked, and the lust for power will soon lead him to murder, and a reign of terror.

Should selling your soul feel like you are doing a terrible thing? Maybe it should; but if it did, that would be pretty artless tempting.

The comedian Eddie Izzard has a sketch about horror films, and why people should know where not to go, because of the scary music: "No, not up the tower in Castle Vlad, because the higher you go, the scarier the music is. Not deeper into the haunted forest – the music is louder in there. Fools!"

And we laugh because we know the characters within the film don't hear the music. Well, temptation is not always accompanied by the scary music either.

For half a century or so now the mantra "If it feels good, do it" has steadily won ground against the older idea that what is

right may feel anything but good, and often really hard. If it feels like carrying a cross, you may be getting it right.

Just as Satan does not come to us in a red lyotard, or wearing a company name-badge, so artful tempting does not make the deal clear, or explain the consequences.

It flies in low, under the radar.

4. Ours

And when I recognise this, I begin to think Jesus' third temptation actually feels closer to my experience after all.

For what's going on here is the offer of something that seems appealing, but there's a cost. Jesus had come to his own, but his own recognised him not. Here's a short-cut to be Lord of all: be Lord of all ... but one. "I'll give you power, Jesus, if you, behind it all, bow to me." But Jesus refused throughout his ministry to ever let the end justify the means, to do wrong to achieve right.

But, albeit in some less obvious ways, I suspect people today are offered versions of the devil's bargain too, more often than we'd like to think.

So, I think it must be very hard to be a politician and not accept that bargain. Politics is the art of the possible, and has to involve compromises and alliances. Many of our public servants try hard, with good heart, to achieve things for the common good, yet it must be hard to know when you reach the line of integrity: all this can be achieved, the greater good, if I just win this vote, give this concession, make that promise. When is that tolerant, reasonable, realistic? When is it something else?

Some others, I fear, care far less about where that line lies, and have been willing to swap success and power for the loss of their souls more cynically. *All this I will give you, if you tell people what they want to hear, if you just bow slightly to racist populism, if you make a case you don't for a minute believe but you know will buy votes.*

OK, but it's still easier to see some others' temptations, harder to see my own.

I'm wondering if they are often undramatic (no scary music), rather every day.

So, whenever if I have opportunity to benefit somehow in a way that harms someone else, maybe that deal has not been drafted in heaven:

Like, If I'm angry with someone, and have the chance to say that cutting, hurtful thing, even if it's not *quite* fair, but would make me feel good ... The voice I don't quite hear is saying: *All this gratification I'll give you, if you say what you're longing to! Go on, they deserve it.*

If I have power or influence – and that could be at work, in church, in the Allotment Association, in the family, wherever – if I use whatever power or influence I have to benefit me, or someone I like, over someone I like less, will Jesus see me as making him Lord in that, or am I letting someone else pull the strings? *You can give yourself this; I'll let you.*

If I have money to invest, does it matter what the fund is used for? Do I know? If I'm investing in arms used on Yemenese children, is that OK? *All this pension I will give you, if you don't ask awkward questions about complicated things, Rick.*

And now I'm being realistic about how temptation comes, I think the first of Jesus' desert experiences might be important for me to listen to as well. Bread from stones. What's so wrong with that?

Nothing, except the need to be able to master our hungers, not vice-versa. We live in times – even as Christians – where we look back on the fastidious holiness of some of our Christian ancestors with distaste, and some superiority – all those things they wouldn't do; so life-denying.

Yes, but we've somehow created a mindset where to deny ourselves anything we want looks suspect; if it feels good, you're entitled to it, do it. At the same time we've fashioned a society – purely coincidentally, I'm sure: no link ... – more locked into all manner of addictions than ever before, to drugs, drink, gambling, sex, online pornography, food. The idea of denying ourselves anything feels so foreign, we marvel at Jesus refusing bread. But it's the ability to refuse when it's right to do so, the discipline, that maybe matters most.

It's interesting that Jesus overcame hunger in a desert; back in the Genesis story there was the abundance of paradise – fruit everywhere available – but the one thing forbidden, for their own good, this they still have to go and eat. It's not the availability of food – fast or famine – it's not the level of need but the ability to refuse that looks significant here.

Maybe the same is true for me.

Maybe my Christian forebears avoided sin by never getting the line, and that does cause problems – there is a kick-back; maybe my generation, though, have lost any sense there is a line anywhere at all.

CONCLUSION:

And so the more I think about it, I wonder if my problem preaching the temptations is not so much that they don't really relate to me, but that I don't really relate to them.

My culture, much of the church even, my heart, have so downplayed the choices, large and small, that we make about who is really in charge in my actions, who I'm putting in charge, that I find it hard to think about it clearly.

Maybe the scary music used to play in my conscience more loudly; maybe my hearing has become poor, or I've slowly, slowly turned down the volume on that inconvenient app in my brain.

I think I'd better think this out again.

Maybe I need a season of penitence to help me.

Ah – Lent. That could be handy, then.