

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

*Tempting or testing?*

E. 05.03.17

‘I can resist anything except temptation’: so said the great wit, Oscar Wilde, and our story this morning from Genesis is about one famous failure to resist temptation. Adam and Eve, slyly manipulated by the wicked serpent, are tempted to disobey God’s command not to eat forbidden fruit - and the result is catastrophe, a world ruined, fallen far short from this paradise of Eden.

That’s the familiar version of the story, aided and abetted by centuries of biblical exposition. This morning, however, I want to question whether this is really a story about temptation at all, or whether it’s actually a story about testing, and I would suggest that there is a crucial difference between the two. Temptation, surely, is about catching us out. It’s about enticing us to do wrong and it’s the work of the devil. Testing, however, involves learning about ourselves. It’s about self-knowledge, self-understanding, and it’s essential to human growth and indeed to our relationship with God.

In the forecourt of the temple of Apollo in Delphi in Greece were written the words ‘Know thyself’ and this became a principle of ancient Greek wisdom. Self-knowledge is vital if we are to grow and mature as people. In fact the great Genevan reformer John Calvin, one of the key figures in the Reformation, began the great theological work for which he is best known with these words: ‘our wisdom, in so far as it is to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves’. And we only grow in knowledge of ourselves as we grow in the knowledge of God, and we only grow in knowledge of God as we grow in knowledge of ourselves. The two things go together. But knowledge of ourselves involves testing, for in testing things are revealed to us that might otherwise remain hidden.

That, surely, is what is happening in this story in Genesis. The serpent comes by and probes Adam and Eve, testing the desires of their hearts, testing their yearnings, testing their loyalty to God. And thus the truth about them is exposed, revealed. Without this testing Adam and Eve would not have known about their inclination to doubt God and his Word. Without such testing they would not have realised their capacity to

misrepresent God and to distort God as they do here – when did God ever tell them they could not even touch this fruit? Through this testing their curiosity and their desire to push boundaries is revealed and such expanding of horizons can be good and creative but it can also be harmful and destructive and such things must therefore be exposed and named. And it is surely significant that the story ends with them realising that they are naked. They see themselves as they are really are. They are exposed. And no wonder they begin at once to stitch together fig leaves, because sometimes when we see ourselves as we really are we just want to cover up, to hide the truth.

So too with Jesus' time in the wilderness. Is this temptation, or is it testing? At this point in the story Jesus is about to embark on his ministry with all its dangers and pitfalls and one thing that is crucial is that he should know himself inside out – that he should know his passions, know his weaknesses, know where he is vulnerable, where he is open to negotiation with the devil. Only as these things are revealed can they be exposed to the grace of God. The devil performs the necessary task of unearthing the promptings that Jesus must resist, and as a result he comes out of the wilderness with a deeper knowledge of himself and a deeper relationship with God and a stronger person.

And there are so many moments in our lives when we are tested this way. Maybe you can think of some. Moments when something happens to us and we discover things about ourselves we never really knew. Not always bad things. Perhaps in a time of testing we discover strengths we never knew we had, resources that have lain hidden. Or maybe we find ourselves shamed at the way we have behaved and we realise there are hidden faults and unresolved issues that need addressing. Or we discover with gratitude our dependence upon others. Or we discover where we are more dependent on God's grace than we thought and we grow closer to God. And such discoveries are the very stuff of our walk with God and our growth as people.

And so to Lent. I would suggest that Lent is a time when we strive for a deeper knowledge of God through a deeper knowledge of ourselves. It's a season of growth. After all, what is the point of Lenten disciplines? Why are fasting and abstinence traditionally associated with this season? Surely their significance lies in their ability to reveal to us

things about ourselves – our passions, our addictions, our dependencies, things that are covered up, hidden from ourselves and from God. Lent, with its traditional disciplines, reveals the naked truth of who we are. And so we offer ourselves more fully to the God who loves us as we are, but who yearns that we might grow in grace as his beloved children.