



The Temptation on the Mountain
engraved by J. Cousen and published in 1835
after JMW Turner (image of original not available on the web)

Temptation is a theme with which all of us are very familiar, every day of our life!

The written gospel accounts of the temptations of Jesus that were read in today's Gospel reading (Luke 4: 1-13) are, of course, idealised and represent a formal theological statement about his nature and purpose. Admittedly, to the casual reader or hearer, the story may feel unrealistic or difficult to identify with. To enjoy and appreciate the deep experience of this narrative, it is necessary to have some insight into the Christian tradition and some theological equipment with which to assess it.

However, this does not take away the fact that when it comes to reality, we all give in to temptation. It is something which we cannot deny and something we need to challenge in ourselves.

Lent is a traditional period in which we are invited to focus on making this challenge concerning, for example, such things as our petty dishonesty with ourselves, as well as our more serious dishonesty with others. Lent has been set aside as a time to confront our demons, face down our temptations and come through triumphantly towards our own personal Easter and the Easter season which we will celebrate together in six weeks time.

Confronting our temptations is a lonely activity. You may find support, if you are in need, but the truth is that nobody else can do it for you. Only you can confront temptation, only you can take the responsible decisions required. But, what pleasure, it is not only you who will be able to feel the satisfaction and benefit of having resisted successfully. Your life will be enhanced and those around you will feel the benefit because you will be more of a whole person again, more able to give of yourself, more able to be a support to others.

In the world of temptation, much may be at stake and much is to be lost and gained. It is an area of high risk and heightened self-awareness.

The image at the head of the page is an engraving by J. Cousen, after a painting by Turner. It conveys some of the emotions of our theme today. In the area of temptation, we seem to be on the edge of a chasm, in danger, acutely aware of the terrible fate which awaits us if we fall down to the foot of the cliff. We stand precariously, and there, on the very edge of the danger, if not beyond it, someone is beckoning us, enticing us to step over and take the plunge. Someone for whom all this temptation lark is a joke, something to laugh away as unimportant, no problem, easy come and go!

The engraving describes one of the temptations of Jesus. The Devil takes him to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and offers to him, but at a price. The price is that Jesus must worship the Devil.

The temptation is real. There are many who would like the wealth and power of controlling the world, or at least a large slice of it, with all the perks it would bring. That would make winning £50 million on the Lottery look like small beer!

It has been tried by so many in history! The Roman Emperors, Attila the Hun, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, as well as many others from the world of fiction, like those horrid people against whom Dr. Who and James Bond are continually struggling!

Put into a more simple human context, the temptation is to use your power wrongly, to abuse your position, your knowledge or your information so that someone else is unfairly disadvantaged and you become the beneficiary of some of the goodies of this world without making the appropriate honest effort.

For Jesus, this temptation is quickly rejected. He will use his life to serve others, to heal, to console, to teach, to lead, to confront corrupt authority and then, to show the human face of God by going to the cross in an act of undefended love, dying outside the city wall as a criminal, deserted by his followers and friends.

Brothers and sisters, we are invited to resist this temptation in the same way as Jesus did, with all the risks and pains and suffering which this might attract.