

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 1 March, 2020

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

Trials or temptation?

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. It began on Ash Wednesday. The origin of the word Lent is from middle English – ‘lencten’ means spring, which also means ‘long.’ Perhaps a day becomes long in spring. In Christian tradition, Lent is the period of 40 days¹ that comes before Easter. So the last week of Lent is called the Holy week. In the past, Lent is marked by fasting, both from food and festivities which correspond to Christ’s forty-day fast.²

Lent is also a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter, which allow us to follow the path that Jesus walked to the cross. So today we begin this Lenten journey with two stories – one is from Genesis and the other, from Matthew. Both stories illustrate that the first couple – man and woman, and Jesus were tempted by tempters respectively, and their responses to the temptation. We will think about it briefly. Then we’ll see what the word temptation – (πειράζω peirazō try; tempt) means in the bible. It will lead us to reflect on the life of the church today. In short, what happened there? What is the meaning of the word temptation in the bible? And what does it tell us – the church today? - will be our focus.

What happened in Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7?

In Genesis, especially in 3:1-7, under the title of the first sin and its punishment, we heard how the first man and woman were tempted by a tempter – the serpent. We heard that God allowed man to eat of every tree of the garden freely except one – the fruit of the tree of knowledge.³ Yet, as the event unfolded, we see that man not only didn’t protest against the serpent’s deceiving words, but also he didn’t prevent woman from eating the fruit. He even took part in it. Interestingly there is no such word ‘temptation in this passage.’ Yet we read

¹ Why 40 days? - 40 is a significant number in Jewish-Christian scripture: In Genesis, the flood which destroyed the earth was brought about by 40 days and nights of rain; The Hebrews spent 40 years in the wilderness before reaching the land promised to them by God.; Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. ; Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry.

² Matthew 4:2

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this event as temptation as it led them to the irrecoverable downfall. Their reckless action had disrupted the relationship with God and this disobedience to God became the root of all sins.

What happened in Matthew 4:1-11?

Temptation in Matthew 4:1-11 begins like this: ‘Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.’⁴ Here the two words are interesting: one is the Spirit (τοῦ πνεύματος), and the other is the devil (τοῦ διαβόλου). It seemed to happen by the will of God as in the Book of Job in which God allowed Satan- ἰφζ to test a blameless and upright man whom God loved.⁵

Jesus was famished as he fasted forty days and forty nights. The tempter began his scheme with these words – ‘if you are the son of God,...’ The tempter seemed to acknowledge the identity of Jesus as the son of God,⁶ but it was only a trap to make Jesus respond to his words as it happened in the garden of Eden. Yet Jesus didn’t act on this enticement to prove he was indeed the son of God. Rather he showed how one must act on according to this relationship with God. Jesus didn’t want to prove or show off even though he was nearly dying. Place total trust in God that was enough for him. As seen the temptation that Adam and Eve together with Jesus had encountered leads us to this fundamental question – why do we encounter temptation?

What is the meaning of the word temptation - πειρασμός in the bible?

The word temptation in Greek is ‘peirasmos’ πειρασμός, οὔ, ὅ, which means test/temptation (verb - ‘to tempt’ ‘peirazō’ πειράζω try; tempt). The fundamental meaning of the stem peira~ is ‘test’ and ‘try’ or ‘put to some sort of test.’ This testing is accompanied by burdening, risk, uncertainty, and even danger and mistrust. Depending on the intention at hand, the test can be, positively, a test in which one proves oneself or, negatively, an enticement to failure. Since persons are virtually the only object of such testing in the NT, trust, faithfulness, and obedience usually play a role as well. This is the meaning of temptation in general in the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

⁴ Matthew 4:1 Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνήχθη εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος **πειρασθῆναι** ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου.

⁵ Job 1:8-12

⁶ Matthew 3:16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

Another examples of peirazō' outside the Synoptic gospels is in Hebrew 2:18⁷ and 4:15. Jesus' temptation appears here in the same context as the afflictions affecting all human beings, specifically suffering (5:7; 11:1ff). It reads, 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.' (Hebrews 5:7). Further in Hebrew 11, we read all these names such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, who had kept faith in God although they had to encounter many trials. Here we see that the word temptation – peirazō is used more like a trial. In English, we see temptation and trial are two different words. But in Greek, it can mean either temptation or trial. The word temptation/trial is not new to us at all. Whenever we pray the Lord's prayer, we meet this word 'peirasmos' (πειρασμός).⁸ We have different translations, but they are from the same word.⁹

So what now? When we say, 'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil' does it mean that it is God who leads us to temptation? To this we have an answer already. In James 1:13-14, it reads, 'No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. (14) But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;' So what is this all about for us as church?

What does this temptation story tell us - the church today?

The temptation stories tell us one important thing. That is, whenever we encounter temptation or trial, it is when we need to refresh our relationship with God. Lent is the time for it. During Lent, we are following the path that Jesus had walked spiritually through prayers, reflections, reading scriptures, fasting, giving alms to charities to name a few. All these actions and reflections are not simply to imitate what Jesus did and experienced, Rather it is when we really look into our relationship with God praerfully. As we see from the case of Adam and Eve, we are susceptible to any stimuli or provocation even we think that we are abide in Christ. Lent allows us to revisit our current state of mind, heart and soul in God sincerely.

⁷ Hebrews 2:18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

⁸ Matthew 6:13a - And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (KJV, ESV); And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (ASV); And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (NRSV).

⁹ Matthew 6:13 καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς **πειρασμόν**, ἀλλὰ ῥύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ.

Let's finish this reflection with this prayer. Lord of Lent, thank you for allowing us to explore temptation that was experienced by Adam and Eve, and Jesus. We have learned that the foremost thing is to keep our faith in Christ no matter what the circumstances. Lord, even if we stumble, protect us and guide us while we are continuing this faith journey. Whenever we encounter a desert or wilderness, hunger, thirst, vulnerability and temptation, let us remember this - Jesus Christ had fulfilled everything we need on the cross. When we keep this faith, neither temptation, nor trial, nor death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁰ We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹⁰ Romans 8:38-39