**Saying no**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

"Learn to say no. It will be of more use to you than to be able to read Latin." I quite like this quote from Charles Spurgeon and that is not just because I cannot remember any of the Latin I learnt in school.

Temptation, the theme of the first Sunday in Lent, is about saying no, saying no that is, to whatever is not of God.

Saying no to something that often seems harmless but potentially pleasurable is not easy, and you don’t have to be a teenager to know that. For temptation comes in all forms to all generations.

In his book Velvet Glove, Iron Fist Konosuke Matsushita, founder of Panasonic, writes about a politician called Yang Zhen who was known for his upright character.

Yang Zhen had just been made governor when one day one of his former patrons, Wang Mi, came to see him. After some polite chit chat Wang MI who wanted his old friend on his side, donated a precious golden cup to the new governor . But to Wang Mi’s surprise Yang Zhen did not want to accept the present. “No one will know” Wang Mi insisted. “No” answered Yang Zhen “but Heaven will know and so will you and I”

All through his career Yang Zhen would continue to say “No” to bribes and he would be known all over the country for his integrity.

Temptation is about saying no when saying yes looks to be so much more beneficial, when saying yes seems to make so much more sense.

Indeed evil, or if you prefer, the non-Christ-like option, does, more often than not, seem quite sensible, good even. The arguments used to defend a certain act might seem perfectly acceptable, they might even be based on Scripture and yet the act itself might be utterly wrong.

To understand this better let’s look at the first temptation in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ wilderness experience:

Jesus has just been baptised. And God has confirmed to those who were present that he is the Son of God. A confirmation that has consequences. Which is why Jesus withdraws into the desert to reflect on what his calling means for him.

He retreated to the desert for 40 days, away from other people, away from other distractions to prepare himself for all the temptations that would come his way in his ministry, temptations probably common to all leaders. that is wealth, glamour and power.

Why not tell these stones to become bread?

Imagine all those stones you see on the beach every day, turned into loaves of bread to feed all the people who go to the Foodbank for help, or to feed the refugees who have left war torn Syria, with nothing to call their own. Wouldn’t that be the right thing to do, if you could?

Surely feeding people in this way would be something our society would approve of. It could even, as an extra benefit, make the Church more popular than it is at the moment.

But Jesus says “No”, he is not about to be the most popular charity provider of his time. Why not when it would help so many people? Why not now, when later on he will feed thousands with 5 loaves and two fish?

Because if he did it now, it would be for the wrong reasons. It would be to attract attention to himself and **his** generosity and not to God.

Jesus’ ministry is not essentially about filling the stomachs or the pockets of the poor. His ministry is about filling the hole that is their spiritual hunger.

You may have all the money you might ever need, all the cars you might ever want, houses with swimming pools all over the world, but you will continue to be missing something if you haven’t filled that which the philosopher Pascal called “the God shaped hole”. And Jesus has come to fill **that** hole.

Man shall not live by bread alone. The material, food, money is not at the centre of all. God is.

The next temptation that faces Jesus is to prove not just that he is God’s beloved but that God really exists, by doing something that surely will attract everybody’s attention something so spectacular that people are bound to believe in him.

Why not throw yourself down the parapet of the temple?

And everyone will not only see God and his power, they will see his love for his only begotten Son, and therefore his love for all his children.

Only people high on drugs believe you can jump of a high building safely.

So surely it would be effective if Jesus jumped and allowed angels to catch him. Wouldn’t that prove God’s presence amongst us, wouldn’t that prove God’s love? Wouldn’t that show how much Jesus trusts God?

Miracles, o don’t we all wish for them. Surely they would show to those who don’t believe in God that He really exists. If only God stopped earthquakes and tsunami’s, if only he made our sick grandson better, then we and the whole world would believe.

That would be world’s view. But actually real trust in God is not trusting that he will create miracles to suit us, but that he will be with us always; through good days and bad days. Really trusting God is accepting our life, the journey that lies ahead of us and knowing that he walks it with us.

God could have caught Jesus, he could have prevented Jesus from suffering on the cross, but if he had, would we now have believed in him? Would we have known that he is truly with us? Would we have known how far his love really goes?

Why not become ruler over all the kingdoms of the earth there and then?

Now this is the devil’s trump card; power. And to make it all the more tempting he takes Jesus up on the mountain top, the place where in Hebrew understanding, one is closest to God. The place where Moses was allowed to see the promised land.

And the devil shows Jesus the whole world, there for the taking, if only Jesus pays homage to him.

Which is a roundabout way of saying, just rely on yourself, you can have the whole world at your feet if only you play your cards right.

You can be a successful leader or politician but you will need to say that which society wants to hear, that which fits with today’s popular views. Change your message to suit the crowds. And you’ll have real power.

Jesus could have chosen this way, the way of the world, the way that makes you popular. The way that gets applause and money and sponsors, the way that brings in the votes.

And would this way have been so wrong, if it helped people?

Yes it would for it is not God’s way. It would have put personal success and popularity over faithfulness. It would not have had God at its centre. It would not have aimed at bringing people closer to God.

Having God at the centre is about realising what it means to be children of God and focusing on Him before taking big decisions, before starting on a new journey . Having God at the centre of our lives is about trusting him, relying on his power and working for his kingdom.

It is having Christ at the centre of our lives that will help us recognise temptation when we encounter it and that will help us withstand it.

*Reinhard Bonnke tells the following parable:*

*There once was a man who owned a big house. One day the doorbell went when he answered the door he discovered Jesus stood in front of him, so he invited him in, telling him he could stay as long as he wanted , he would prepare the guest room for him.*

*Later that night he heard the door bell again, when he answered the door the devil walked in. The man fought as hard as he could, trying to get rid of the devil, while at the same time calling for help as loudly as he could.*

*Finally the devil left. The next morning when Jesus came down for breakfast the man couldn’t help but complain that Jesus never came to his rescue. So Jesus responded “You know what the problem is? you have this really big house all to yourself, but you have offered me only one of your rooms to live in.”*

*So the man offered Jesus the top floor.*

*But the next night the devil barged in again. Again the man fought with him screaming for help as loudly as he could until he finally managed to throw him out. As he complained again about not receiving any help Jesus pointed out to him that he still had kept the bottom floor to himself And so the man declared the whole house from now on belonged to Jesus. And when the next night the devil knocked on the door Jesus answered and when the devil saw him he said “sorry, wrong house”*

During the season of lent, which lasts for 40 days, just like Jesus’ time of reflection and temptation in the desert, many people choose to fast and avoid tempting sweets or alcohol. But it might be more meaningful if instead, or better still in addition to such fasting, we reflected on our lives and on the true temptations we might encounter on **our** journey. It might be more meaningful if we reflected on the ways in which **we** may be tempted to please the world and be personally popular and successful rather than be faithful to God. It might be more meaningful if we asked ourselves whether we had welcomed Jesus in all areas of our life.

For it is only when we acknowledge our temptations that we can face them, and only when we face them that we can withstand them by trusting solely in Him who knew all the temptations that we may encounter and who said No out of love for us.