

**Sermon for 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2026 (Rev J. Shakespeare)**

*Genesis 2. 15-17, 3.1-7. Romans 5. 12-19. Matthew 4. 1-11*

Words from the Baptism liturgy, which speak into today, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent:  
*“Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ...”*

It is, one can be quite certain, a perennial human problem, and yet one which today we could not be more uncomfortable with discussing – and I mean, of course, human sin and temptation. Our media are fixated on people’s weaknesses or failures, especially if we’re talking about particular institutions, leaders or social groups. But when it comes to acknowledging our common human sinfulness – that which we know, deep down, to be true – we draw a blank... It’s simply assumed, by many, no longer to be the case or at least, not to be that much of an issue anymore. It’s as if improved knowledge and social progress, causes us no longer to be the fallen, finite and fallible human beings that our forebears always knew we were. We’ve grown beyond that kind of attitude. Or have we?

Yet, if we look within ourselves and at the world around us, we discover that human nature hasn’t changed, that the problem of sin is as real as ever, or even (it could be argued) more challenging than before... because we have the potential to act (in a globalised world), in a way which has far more immediate and wide-ranging consequences.

As the poet W B Yeats wrote in a poem written in the wake of World War 1:  
*“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.”* Yeats knew, as did the survivors of his war-torn generation, that something has gone badly wrong ... and human sin was as real as ever. + Recently, in our media, the extent of human failings & misuse of power and influence – in terms of the Epstein affair & wider, has become shockingly evident.

Today’s readings remind us of that universal human experience, which we reflect on during Lent: namely sin and temptation. And if I risk over-stating the problem, let us remind ourselves of the value of honestly facing our situation and growing through it, that Christianity offers. It is, if nothing else (and fortunately for us, there is much else) a powerful antidote to the common self-delusion of our contemporary culture. For faith, drawing on conscience, holds up a mirror to our experience, in a way that culture (on the whole) does not.

So what do we make of the problem, as the Bible presents it to us, and what of the spiritual medicine that our worship – during this time of Lent – offers us? For we all know, if we are honest, that we are not guiltless, that our hearts are unclean+ that we are just as capable of sin and evil as anyone else. As we ask God each week, in the opening words of

this service, *“cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit ...”* Something we need to do again and again, if we are to grow in grace and virtue.

There are, of course, many ways of interpreting the Bible’s attitude towards sin, not least as viewed through the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. And for me it goes without saying that we are talking here (as in the 1<sup>st</sup> 11 Chapters of Genesis, pre=Abraham) not of literal historical events, but poetic stories which convey profound truths about our human nature. Much ink has been spilt on the significance of the apple in the story, and on whether it was Adam or Eve or the serpent who were, ultimately, responsible for our fall from grace. But what can be said is that the apple, taken from the forbidden tree of knowledge, is a symbol of that action that fractured the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and God – namely the desire to be like him, and to substitute our own pride and self-importance for reliance on him.

When put like that the analysis of Genesis becomes surprisingly contemporary, as we think of our own tendency to be self-reliant rather than fully reliant on God... let alone society’s bigger self-reliance, writ large. And it’s as we read the Old Testament, in this perspective, that we find a surprisingly helpful set of reflections on one particular people getting it wrong, again and again, as they failed to remember their reliance on God, seeking instead to go it alone. As one Biblical scholar writes - such sin

*‘involved disobedience, failure of loyalty, a fracturing of the creator’s intention, which, because it was a turning away from the source of life, [could not] but bring death.’*

So what about Jesus being tempted in the wilderness: how can this help us, you may well ask, since he (being both God & man) was able to be tempted as we are, yet without sin?

What comes across most profoundly, as we reflect on Jesus in the wilderness, is the way in which he - in contrast to everyone else who preceded him, from Adam and Eve, to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness – was able to keep faith with God’s intentions for him, without replicating their disobedience. Jesus’ temptations, in the context of his 40 days in the wilderness, concerned not necessarily the sins that we might be tempted by, but the challenge for him to opt for an easier route to fulfilling God’s will... a kind of substitute messiah-ship, which exchanged a gospel of salvation for short-term human gratification, authority and power.

Faithful to God, Jesus - aware from his baptism of God’s total love for him - chose instead the one path that would help get us out of the mess we find ourselves in, namely transforming love and obedience, a love which led him to the Cross. What was hanging in the balance, as Jesus agonised in the wilderness, was the salvation of the world. Had Jesus chosen the alternative route he would still, no doubt, have achieved some good, but humankind would not have been given the way out of human alienation that Jesus made possible. What he achieved was not so much a blueprint for us to follow, but – as St Paul outlines in Romans 5 - a divine strategy for dealing with sin once and for all:

*“If, because of the one man’s trespass [Adam, the prototype of humanity], death exercised dominion through that one; much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace... exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”*

What Lent offers us is a way of dealing with sin and temptation that really works. And so what we find, contrary to our expectations, as we journey into the wilderness during Lent (the wilderness of the heart – of prayer & penitence & returning to God’s word), that this is the one place that really does enable us to start dealing with sin, in a life-giving way. Following Jesus into the wilderness may not be comfortable, but stripping away our comforts and familiar landmarks, we are enabled to honestly face ourselves as we really are – sinful, confused and vulnerable – discovering, in our need, the infinite grace and mercy of God, in Jesus Christ.

Stripping ourselves (if we are prepared to take the risk) of self-delusion, we confront those demons we normally choose to ignore, and in so doing, we are opened up to the penetrating grace and mercy of God. And, as we do this (especially through prayer & meditation & reflection – listening to God’s promptings within our hearts) we discover another, deeper side to our experience, namely the joy and the abundant mercy of human life in relationship with God. What the monk Thomas Merton described in his journals as *‘Mercy within mercy within mercy.’*

It’s a bit like peeling back the layers of an onion, and discovering – beneath all the layers, a bright centre which gleams with light. A purer life lived as human persons, in relationship with God, but also in community and solidarity with others. Not seeking to prove ourselves or defend our own self-interested prejudices, but taking the risk of stripping away all those things we usually acquire as substitutes for God – our false selves - in order to reclaim the abundant love that only he can give: our one true self: discovering, as Jesus did in the wilderness, that greater love and trust and vocation, which alone brings freedom – in place of all the lesser desires that so often thwart, ensnare and enslave us.

But of course, Lent reminds us also that sin and temptation will not disappear overnight, they are likely to remain part of our experience. But here we are offered, at every moment, through repentance & radical honesty, complete forgiveness, and the invitation to shape our lives in new ways that offer light and hope, rather than darkness and despair... virtuous circles, rather than vicious ones... a kind of generosity and attentiveness to the other, and to God himself, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the living bread.

And so, this Lent, mindful of God’s deep love for you, I invite you to embrace the wilderness as a place of new life and the desert as a wellspring of unimagined blessing, remembering those words of the poet W H Auden: *‘In the desert of the heart let the healing fountain start.’* So may we discover, here, the healing fountain of mercy, life & peace, and may we be set free from those sins which imprison and prevent us from living as God would have us be. *Amen.*