

Mark 1:12-13

WHICH WAY?

Some of you may remember the TV show *Bewitched*, which I found out this week was actually produced from 1964-1972, but I remember watching it on our TV screens in the early 80s. The show essentially revolved around the relationship of a married couple, Darrin and Samantha Stevens, with the twist that Samantha was a witch, but Darrin was a mere mortal. And while Samantha, at the wriggle of her nose, could make things disappear, or appear, or get jobs done, Darrin insisted that she didn't use her magic to make their lives easier, but that they did everything just like normal people. But regularly, and often with the encouragement of the ultimate interfering mother-in-law, Esmeralda, Samantha would see her messy house, or other jobs that needed doing, or some problem Darrin found himself in at work, and despite what she and Darrin had agreed on she would wriggle her nose to instantly do what she thought needed doing. When the one who wouldn't approve wasn't looking, the option of taking the easy way could sometimes be too hard to resist.

For me, that show and that scenario came into my mind this week when I was thinking about the topic of temptation. How would you define 'temptation'? Or do you have any example you would use to describe it? We might look at temptation as being when we are faced with a choice between two decisions or directions; one which looks attractive and promises immediate pleasure but longer-term harm, while the other might require a bit of discipline and work but ultimately we will be happier and better off taking that path. I also like the way temptation is shown in the comic book series *Tin Tin*, in which Tin Tin's dog Snowy regularly has a battle in his head between the angel and the devil; the battle between doing what Tin Tin has told him to do or taking the bone and immediate pleasure it offers. I like that illustration because I can relate to it well. They're not the be all and end all, but I like the *Bewitched* example of temptation being taking the easy way when we think no one is watching and we can get away with it, and the Snowy in *Tin Tin* one of do I even care about what is good for others or just worry about pleasing myself? Temptations.

We all face temptations, small and large, every day. On the smaller side it might be do I eat that cream biscuit while I am here in the pantry? Do I go and mow the lawn or clean the house instead of watching that game or TV show? Some are a bit more serious: do I say what I really want to say right now or think of a more

diplomatic way to say it? Do I apologise even though I am, in my mind, absolutely in the right? Do I move through my hurt and anger to forgive that person, as hard as that might be, because that's the only way for relationships to be restored the way God intends them to be? Do I put aside more time in my day, my week, to be with God in worship, prayer, Bible reading, because while that might not always be as 'shiny' and attractive as other things around, ultimately it is what I need to give my life it's grounding, fulfillment, hope and purpose? Are there things I am doing, or thinking, or listening to, or putting inside me, which I know are wrong, bad for me, damaging for my relationship with God and others, but I don't want to stop them because I like what I get from them even though I know that long term it is harmful? What are some temptations you face, and sometimes fall to, in your life?

On this first Sunday of the season of Lent, in each of the three years of the cycle of our Bible readings we have the temptation of Jesus. The reading we have this year, from Mark's Gospel, is much shorter than those from Matthew and Luke, just two sentences, but still very important. In each case Jesus' temptation in the desert comes right after His baptism, when the battle lines between God and Satan are laid down, and just before He begins His public ministry. And this setting is important as we look at temptations in our life and how we face them. As soon as Jesus is identified as being with God in His baptism, the devil goes to work on Him. When we are with God, the devil turns up the heat on us. Matthew and Luke tell us that the three temptations Jesus faced were to have God 'magically' supply His food and needs, to protect Him from any kind of harm, and to give Him power without Him taking the road to the cross. In a way they mirror our daily temptations; to get what we want when we want it, please ourselves without worrying about others, and look to fulfill ourselves without worrying about how God's plan and purpose comes into it. But where we, regularly, fall to our temptations, we know that Jesus, thank God, stood up to His.

The Bible is full of stories of people who, like us but unlike Jesus, faced temptations and fell to them. Often these temptations were based on gifts God had given them or positions God had placed them in. Samson was given great strength by God, but instead of using it for God's glory he used it to attract women and put himself above other men. God made David king of Israel, but David used his position to take another man's wife and have her husband killed to cover up his own weakness. Peter was made one of Jesus' closest companions, hearing all He did and said, but when his time came to stand up for Jesus he denied three times he knew Him.

You might be able to think of others. Temptations can come when we use the things God has given us, things intended for our own good and our pleasure, we use them not in the way He has called and intended for us to do. And whether or not we are doing that is something each one of us can only answer for ourselves, but this reading, and the beginning of this season of examination called Lent, is inviting us and giving us the opportunity to do just that.

Temptation. When we find ourselves at that fork in the road of choosing the way that brings quick and easy pleasure and fulfillment but longer-term regret or harm, and the way that might initially be a bit more uphill but the view and what we receive and feel at the top is well worth that initial push through, which way do we go? Sometimes we do ok with it, don't we, while at others we take that quicker way. One way to approach it is knowing the things which tempt us, and to either avoid those people or situations, or to be prepared for when we do face them. I remember my grandmother years ago telling me about one of my uncles who gave up smoking after a huge effort, but the next summer when he'd be having a few beers with mates, who were smoking, he took it up again. That's not to be critical, and I'm certainly not the one to judge, but sometimes to fully overcome temptation we need to change some things. If our temptation is around how we use money, perhaps we need to change the way we manage our money. If our temptation is around telling people exactly what we think, come what may, maybe we can count to 10 before we respond, or write an email or note to vent our feelings but then don't deliver it. A story I read many years ago, by Christian author Adrian Plass, was about a man who took the same train to and from work each day. Over time he ended up regularly sitting beside the same female passenger on each trip, and what began as a casual friendship soon became something deeper. One day he confessed to his wife that he felt he was falling in love with this woman, and his wife replied, 'well then, you'll have to start catching a different train, won't you'. As you face temptations in what you do, what you think, how you act, what you say, are there 'trains' in your life you need to change so you follow the way God is calling you to go?

Temptation. We all face it. We all struggle with it. Sometimes we fall to it and sometimes we don't. But as we do so, it is important to remember that we are not alone. In facing, resisting, and overcoming temptation Himself, Jesus is both with us and helping us in the temptations we face each day. Jesus gives us the example of how to overcome temptation. In the Mathew and Luke versions of this account in response to each of devil's three temptations Jesus responds with words from the Bible. Stay close to God, seek His will for you in each

situation. In some cases which way to go is pretty straight forward, left not right, but in others it can be confusing, and even among Christians we can get different views. Honestly open yourself up to God, pray, read His Word, ask for His help and guidance with your direction.

Because Jesus faced temptation and overcame it, unlike those other Bible characters and unlike us, He is with us to give us strength now also. Pray for God's help in what you face. If you feel you can't face your temptations alone, don't; take Jesus with you. Remember that you are God's baptised child and that nothing can change that. Remember God's promises of love and care in His Word. Bring your temptations with you when you come to receive His body and blood in Holy Communion, and take that promise of love and forgiveness with you as you go back out. If it helps, and you are battling something particularly hard, take a physical reminder of God's love with you.

And, above all else, Jesus gives us the assurance of God's forgiveness when we fail, as we know, at times, we will. That forgiveness is what helps us to try again. That forgiveness is what helps us to know that no matter how often we fall we can keep on going. That forgiveness reminds us that while, yes, we do have to face the consequences of our words and actions here and now, ultimately our relationship with God is restored in Jesus. Jesus' death for us reminds us that while the way we choose might not always be the right one, because of Him it can still always lead us back to God's love.

However you define temptation, whatever temptations you face in your life, know that how Jesus dealt with the temptations He faced both here and in His life gives us an example, strength, and hope in our lives and walk with God. Take this opportunity to think about any temptations in life you struggle with; bring them to God and ask for His help with them. Know that, above all else, when you turn to God you are forgiven. Father, help us with our temptations, and remind us of your forgiveness so we can stay close to you and on your path. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What are the temptations you face in your life; both the ones you can resist and those you regularly fall to? Identifying and knowing them can help you in overcoming them.
- Think about those temptations you find hard to resist, and even fall to. Is there anything you can do in overcoming them? Bring them to God in prayer. Is there someone you can talk to about this struggle? Is there any way you can avoid the situations in which you are tempted?
- Consider what Jesus over coming temptation, and His death on the cross, means for us. Thank God for the forgiveness this brings us when we fall to temptation. Take Jesus with you in situations you find hard to resist so you can choose His way.

Pray: confess to God the times you fall to temptation and ask for His forgiveness. Ask for His strength to overcome the temptations you face in life each day.

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