

## **Lent 1 2022**

Deut 26.1-11

Romans 10.8b-13

Luke 4.1-13

People often talk about morality as if moral decisions are always between the right thing to do and the wrong thing to do. And perhaps this is sometimes true, but as a general theory, it is hopelessly naïve.

For many years, after having been disabused of this simplistic black-and-white notion of things, I reckoned instead that moral decisions were mostly choices between greater and lesser evils. This is not an uncommon thought, I suspect, especially for those of us weaned on modern political discourse, fattened on its cynicism.

But I have since come to see that that assessment of things is heretical, being quite inconsistent with a Christian doctrine of creation, according to which the world is by its nature good, having been made by God who is by definition good.

My error wasn't an *empirical* one, though: I did not get the facts of the case wrong, and I would still say that most of our moral decisions are, in fact, between unideal options. Compromise is an inescapable part of life, including moral life.

Where I went wrong was in my gloomy framing of the thing. This same state of affairs can be described differently: rather than saying that our moral decisions are often between lesser and greater evils, we might say that they are often—perhaps even always—between competing, lesser and greater, *goods*.

Perhaps the difference between these two analyses is semantic: but semantics matter, and the words we use can shape the way we think, which can in turn affect how we behave.

+++

All of which is preamble into thinking about the nature of temptation.

It would be a mistake to think of temptation as a desire for evil things. No, temptation is first the accurate assessment that some thing is *good*, and

therefore desirable: the problem arises when our desire for the thing is out of proportion.

It occurs to me that there is a new—if a little hippy dippy—way of talking about food that is really quite Christian, though probably inadvertently so. I have heard it said recently that there are no “naughty” foods, as a resistance against the many dieting and fitness philosophies that vilify carbs or fat or sugar or even sitting down on chairs. At its most anodyne, this is just the concession that everything is alright in moderation. But at its most interesting, it is a celebration of food that recognises that all foods—even so-called “junk” food—has its proper place in our lives.

This is a profoundly Christian view of the world, which must shape the way we think about temptation on one hand and fasting on the other.

Consider the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. First, the Devil tempts Jesus with the possibility of food, and the end of his hunger after forty days of fasting. Food is not evil: and indeed it is not easy to see at first what the problem is at all. Some readers say that the Devil is trying to get Jesus to use his power

selfishly; others say that the Devil is trying to get Jesus to show off. Whichever it is, the point is that the primary object of desire—bread—is not evil.

Second, the Devil tempts Jesus with all the kingdoms of the world, and authority over them. Again, human civilisations are themselves not evil objects, though much evil does transpire within them; nor is authority per se evil, though some forms of power may well be. Here again, the moral problem is not with the object itself, but with the prescribed means of obtaining it, which is to worship that which is not God. Here alone there is fodder for many sermons on what human beings can bring ourselves to do for power, even with the best of intentions: but those will have to wait for another day.

The third temptation is the Devil's feeblest attempt, as he seems to have nothing to offer: but Jesus's response is telling as to what he stood to have gained, which is reassurance that he enjoys the love of the Father. This desire to be loved and to know that we are loved is, of course, no bad thing; but we know that it can sometimes lead to attention-seeking behaviour and jealousy and other such problems.

+++

Now, it is often said of Lent that its three pillars are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and you will hear about all three of these from this pulpit as the season progresses.

Quite unlike our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Anglicans don't do very much *fasting*; and indeed many British people seem to think that fasting is a Muslim thing, because of Ramadan. If fasting has survived here at all, it is most commonly in secularised form, as a dieting strategy.

This is, of course, not the Christian intention behind fasting, though it is remarkably difficult to say exactly what is, and there is a danger here of tipping into heretical territory.

The heresy in question, is the one I alluded to at the beginning of the sermon, about the denial of the goodness of things; and so fasting becomes the fastidious—if temporary—avoidance of some of those things.

If you are giving anything up for Lent, this is not how you ought to think about it. There is much to say about what fasting is about, but today I will say this: that is it about freeing ourselves to pursue greater goods, having abstained from lesser ones.

I'm told that chocolate, alcohol, and social media are the things most people try to give up for Lent. So:

If you give up chocolate, you might consider what good you might replace it with; or you might spend some time learning about how chocolate is made, and whether there is anything you can do to promote more ethical chocolate production.

If you give up alcohol, you might consider what good can come of sobriety, not to mention the money saved from not buying bottles of booze, that could instead be given away.

If you give up social media, you might consider how better to spend your time and attention; and how better to have conversations and foster relationships than digital platforms usually allow.

But maybe the standard things to give up are just not very interesting from this perspective of fasting as an opportunity to pursue greater goods. Perhaps we should think instead of some good things to pursue—

things that have been niggling at the back of our minds—and give up things accordingly, to free us up to pursue them.