

Oscar Wilde once said: “I can resist anything except temptation.” He also said: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to give in to it.”

These remarks are typically witty, but they aren’t meant to be taken seriously – almost everything Wilde wrote was not meant to be taken seriously.

In today’s reading from Mark – the shortest of all the gospels – we are told that Jesus went into the wilderness to fast, but it doesn’t give any specific details of the temptations. Matthew and Luke do, but none of it appears in John at all.

The word ‘temptation’ comes from the Latin ‘temptatio’ – which means to ‘test’ or ‘try’. The Greek word is *peirasmós*, which means a ‘trial’ or a ‘testing’. So it is a proving of one’s own inner resources and strength, not necessarily mean an enticement to sin. Many of us, in testing or stressful situations – from fractious kids to the frustrations of bureaucracy – might well say aloud: ‘God give me strength!’ I remember my mother saying it many a time when rain kept us in the house during the long school holidays.

Jesus experiences three temptations, although the order in Matthew and Luke differ.

The first temptation: turning stones into bread means putting material things before spiritual things in our internal value system; but one day, sooner or later however, every single physical, material want and need and drive and thing, is abruptly going to cease. When I come to kick the bucket, every material thing I have around me, every relationship I have forged, every friendship I have ever made, every qualification I have ever earned, every painting I have painted and CD or DVD I have ordered from Amazon, every jar of marinated artichokes – or something equally pretentious – that I have ever bought in Waitrose, will be absolutely meaningless. So the first trial or test is this: do I have the inner strength, the courage not to value the material life more than the spiritual? They are not enemies, matter and spirit, or body and soul: one is a vessel of the other and, in the totality of things, they belong together. A glass of good wine on a tranquil evening with someone who is loved, is a perfect example of the marriage of spirit and matter.

The temptations of the Lord are eternal and they belong to all of us. They are built into life itself. However, our contemporary society in the West has completely failed to pass this particular test, because it has made materialism and material excess the god it worships. The devotees of riches, power, privilege and status have created a world that the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann called “fortresses of wealth planted in a sea of misery”. This is not a marriage between spirit and matter – it is a rape.

The second temptation is about power. The devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms and empires of the world if he will but bow down and worship him. The inescapable conclusion here, of course, is that they belong to him – because you can't give away what you don't own. 'All the kingdoms of the world' may sound way beyond the likes of us, but it really isn't. We are all monarchs in our own little kingdoms: at home, at work, in our social group, church community, among friends, within the family: we all like to wear the crown, whether we are aware of it or not. Ambition isn't only for government or power. In fact, the smaller and more modest the kingdom, the more intense the ambition usually

is. So the second trial or test is this: do I have the inner strength, the courage, not to be in charge? Not to always strive to have my own way?

Again, the times we live in have unambiguously failed in this second test. Power is everything and self-empowerment at any cost is the means to achieve it. Power has been confused with authority – it is authority that is genuine, because it comes from within. In Matthew 7:29 it says that Jesus “taught them with authority, unlike their own teachers and scribes.” Power is the antithesis of authority – power is self-imposed from without, but authority radiates from within.

In the third temptation, when the devil encouraged Jesus to throw himself down from the temple, he was encouraging him to put God to the test. ‘Putting God to the test’ – although it may sound like it – is not some antiquated biblical term with little or no meaning for us today. Satan rightly pointed out that God would always protect Jesus, so if he had thrown himself down from the temple height, he would have been forcing God’s hand – obliging him to act. And most of us, in our own quiet way, do this all the time. Of

course, we need to feel that God is there, on our side; yes, we need to pray for his help when things in our life take a downward turn; certainly, we automatically turn to him with hope in our hearts when someone we love is ill or hurt. However: if we imagine that because we have said a certain number of prayers on a certain day of the week for a sufficient number of weeks that God will *be obliged* to grant our request; or if we say the rosary enough times or get enough Masses said God absolutely *must* answer our prayers; or if we think that because we are making a reasonable effort to live a decent life we will force God's hand and ensure that he favours us over the lout or the dishonest, or loves us more than the addict or the promiscuous – we are putting him to the test in exactly the same way Satan tempted Jesus to do.

We can't bargain with God. To imagine that sacrifices, prayers and entreaties will oblige him to do this or that for us, is to disastrously misunderstand the nature of the divine. Yet we *do* imagine it – we all do and we can't help it – because we are human. Being human is our greatest test and temptation of all – and our greatest glory.