

The First Sunday of Lent. 26 February 2023
Sermon. Revd David Treharne. Overcoming provocation and temptation

No-one need feel any sense of superiority or inferiority when it comes to temptation! Temptation is a level playing field!

"You are not tempted because you are evil; you are tempted because you are human." (Fulton Sheen)

In our year of discipleship any serious reflection about what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Christ Jesus, wouldn't be complete without reflection on the issue of temptation and the spiritual battle with dark forces which will read about in the Genesis account and Jesus' own life today. Learning to fight against sin, the flesh and the devil is a key to life and spiritual fruitfulness.

The early Christians (Philokalia) helpfully wrote down their experiences of God and their experiences and encounters of battling against their sinful nature, their own innate weakness and their encounters of battling external forces of evil. Thankfully they also jotted down some of the things that worked in fighting the spiritual battles and overcoming temptation.

1. **Provocation** "did somebody say, just eat." An initial external incitement and enticement to evil / to sin. It first appears as a thought in the mind. This is not a sin. Everyone has thoughts. An external provocation and prompt to sin. Satan works from without to within.
2. **Momentary Disturbance.**
The thought is allowed entry and actually disturbs us.
3. **Engagement / Communion**
We start to entertain the fantasy, the disturbance. We turn it over in our minds.
4. **Assent**
We act upon the ideas/fantasy
5. **Prepossession**
Repeated acts of sin and constant giving in the particular temptations
6. **Passion/Possession**
It becomes an evil passion... even uncontrollable. It holds you captive – becomes wedded to you. Addiction falls into this category.

But it is the first point of the process, provocation, that I want to focus on as dealing with things at this initial point of provocation/temptation can be transformative. Jesus had a provocation or enticement to eat. Of course eating is not wrong, eating is not a sin, eating is normal, food is God given to satisfy hunger. And the provocation only seems small... (you're hungry, go on eat)

However, the provocation if yielded to would have had massive consequences – as with many provocations. Jesus was being tempted to eat whilst undergoing the discipline of fasting, whilst he was hungering after the things of God... and for God to not be satisfaction enough. The provocation was to misuse the power of God, to be disobedient to the leading of the Spirit and rebel against his identity and his call, "Come on, if you're God's Son you can do the spectacular." The enticement was to satisfy self above the satisfaction of the Word of God, to distort his desire from being directed and centred upon and fulfilled first and foremost and fully by God. If he had yielded to the provocation the plan of God's salvation would have been derailed.

The provocation of Jesus occurs at a point of human weakness. He is physically hungry when the provoking starts. The tempter, or perhaps we could rename him today, the provoker... provokes us at our weak points.

Provocation presses our buttons - it triggers something within us.

Now, not all provocation is spiritual and satanic. Growing up I was very good at provoking my father and pressing his buttons and knowing his trigger points. In fairness he was easily provoked and my provocation would cause a reaction and a chain of events that I found funny... and he didn't! No, not all provocation is satanic but there are demonic forces at work provoking the people the God... unholy spirits.

Being human we all have natural points of weakness but as fallen people with a sinful nature we have additional points of weakness and susceptibility to the evil one and these unholy forces.

The early texts of the church talk about the demons provoking and taking a hold... being given space within us... a co-operative soul. Their understanding developed into the idea of deadly sins taking root within us. Traditionally, there were the deadly or root sins...

1. **Anger (Enneagram type 1)**
2. **Pride (type 2)**
3. Envy (type 4)
4. **Avarice or Greed (type 5)**
5. Gluttony (type 7)
6. Excess or Lust (type 8)
7. **Laziness or Sloth (type 9)**
8. Deceit (type 3)
9. Fear (type 6)

That image of the old Tom and Jerry cartoon with the demon on the shoulder and the ready and willing response to welcome the demons suggestion can be helpful. We welcome the demons suggestion(s) and presence to the extent that patterns of unhealthy and unholy thinking and behaviour (common to most of us, that might not look much like a deadly sin – 'turning stones to bread') can establish themselves and rob us of the life God intends for us.

- Despair and fear at the state of the world leading to despair, anxiety and a lack of hope
- A moribund prayer life and a disinterested and apathetic spirit
- A critical spirit toward self and or others... moaning and complaining. A lack of joy and hope
- Perfectionism... being right.
- Dejection when things go wrong
- Chronic avoidance
- Hyper fixation on daydreams & escapism
- Driven to achieve, having to win, needing to succeed.
- Excessive need to be needed
- Obsession with work and not stopping
- Worrying about what people will think of us all the time
- Inability to handle being still and bored

Jesus came that we might have life and life in all its fullness. Yielding to unholy provocation and disturbance over and over in our lives and allowing sin and behaviours to take a root within us robs us of that fullness of life in Christ.

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), releasing us from the vice like grip of sin and unhealthy and unholy patterns of living. To bring us out of darkness and shadows (Adam and Eve) and into his marvellous light! To thrive as the people of God!

So how might we overcome temptation and prevent sin getting a hold when the demons come calling, provoking and enticing.

Awareness and recognising what's going on... recognising our buttons and patterns of behaviour we're susceptible to.

Honesty – not excuses or denial! Jesus was honest enough to have shared his experiences with his disciples for them to have been recorded in Scripture. He also names his weakness and point of provocation. He names it and brings to light what is in the spiritual ether. "I'm hungry and fasting and you're tempting me..."

When we're weak and facing an assault on our minds and hearts, be aware and honest. Romans 7:24b&25 "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" We turn to Christ. He has walked the road we're walking. Christ models discipline in obedience to the Spirit and through his presence in us and with us enables us to overcome temptation too!

Don Moen song... He walked where I walked

He walked where I walked. He stood where I stand. He felt what I feel. He understands

He knows my frailty. Shared my humanity. Tempted in every way. Yet without sin
God with us! So close to us. God with us. Emmanuel

Look to Jesus to save us and help us. He is with us, God with us, and has given us the power of his Spirit... the same Spirit he relied on in the wilderness when tempted... to overcome the provocation and the disturbance and disruption of our lives.

Look to be led and influenced and possessed by God's Holy Spirit, provoked by love rather than being led by our weaknesses and sinful inclinations and demonic provocation.

Choose to listen, and practice listening, to the promptings of the Spirit in our conscience and not to the nagging provocative voices that sometimes deafen us. We seek to be possessed not by our own feelings of superiority or inadequacy but by the Holy Spirit of God.

We live by God's word, we're defined by God's word, rather than the voices of accusation, voices of luring and enticement and the voices of temporary satisfaction and selfishness. Instead of being constantly reminded by voices of provocation, we are re-minded by the voice of Christ. We think differently, focus and concentrate differently.

We push back against that initial provoking... doing it at the earliest point of the thought. No longer entertaining how woeful we are or allowing the thought to bring on those horrible desolate feelings and guilt etc... Get in there early with God's love and peace and mercy. Take every thought captive for Christ (St Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Replace the erroneous provocation with a thought prompted by the Spirit, given in the Word.

Renew your mind: Romans 12:2, be transformed by the renewing of your mind .Colossians 3:2. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Put on the armour of God (Ephesians 6).

Philippians 4:6-8, ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Temptation recedes when we utterly shun the provocation and disturbance or the passion behind it, and it recedes a lot easier when shunned early!

Praise and worship... worship the Lord your God and serve him only... is also a great way to refocus the mind when provoked.

Discipline and obedience are really important fruits of the Spirit to cultivate. In an age of freedom and rebellion we don't like these much but Jesus had both, and they sustained him, fed him, when the tempter provoked him.

Finally, minister to one another. Jesus had angels minister to him after being tempted. We can be angels to one another, not to condemn but to love, support, encourage and pray as we battle provocation, disturbance and sin.

Jesus practiced disciplines: solitude, prayer, fasting, digesting and applying Scripture, obedience, confession

The Philokalia gives many strategies including: contrition of heart, patience and prayer, intense prayer to God, frequent meditation on the Scriptures, manual labour, humility, accountability, discernment and watchfulness (alertness, purity of heart and stillness)

I hope this will help us all to recognise the spiritual battle we're against sin, the flesh and the devil. As I conclude, what provocations from an unholy spirit might you have received or even be receiving right now – accusation, dejection, apathy... ? And what prompting of the Spirit of God might you be receiving? Choose life and invite the Holy Spirit to re-mind, re-new, re-fresh our lives.