

Reflection

Alan Harper, Tuesday 5th March 2019
St Stephen's Uniting Church Sydney

Luke 4:1-13

Today is Pancake Tuesday. If you're able to stay for refreshments after worship, there will be pancakes with butter and jam – well worth hanging around for!

Why? What is Pancake Tuesday? What is this peculiar custom?

In the European tradition, Pancake Tuesday was your last chance to indulge yourself prior to the start of Lent the next day, Ash Wednesday. Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, of course, and Lent traditionally has been a time of disciplined fasting and self-denial. Lent is said to be forty days in duration – but that doesn't include the Sundays; so it's actually over six weeks. It's a long time to spend fasting and denying oneself luxuries. And so, at the other end of Lent, we have the other tradition – one we're more familiar with – that, on Easter Sunday, when Lent is behind us and the resurrection of the Lord is celebrated, we can again indulge ourselves – hence the tradition of chocolate eggs. Hot cross buns are a little more complicated than that, but they too are traditionally a treat to mark the end of fasting and deprivation.

But, you know, we're not very good at self-denial these days.

Easter is late this year. Easter Sunday will fall about four months after Christmas. But, at least at my local Coles, Easter eggs *and* hot cross buns have been offered for sale since immediately after Christmas. And, I can assure you that people have been buying them! Forget this fasting and self-denial stuff; no deprivation for us; let's get straight to the rewards end of Lent. Let's spend four months indulging ourselves!

Sadly that kind of thinking is so typical of the Western world we live in. The very notion of self-discipline has been significantly watered down. We are forever being told by the advertising industry that we *deserve* our luxuries. Why deny yourself? Why *would* you deny yourself? Why *should* you deny yourself? Why not just enjoy all the things you like, all the time. Every day's a treat!

So what's *is* the point of fasting and self-denial during Lent? Why would we do it? It's not some ritual to please God. We can't *earn* God's love or grace or forgiveness. God gives those gifts freely. *Nothing* we can do can earn us "brownie points" that will somehow oblige God to shower us with more love than he already does, or treat us better than other people.

No, the point about Lenten fasting is that it follows the model set by Jesus when he fasted for forty days in the wilderness of Judaea. While Jesus *triumphed* over the temptations to

sin, all *we* can hope to do in our fasting is to strengthen our self-discipline, and to remind ourselves of our sinfulness, and of our utter dependence on God's grace. As the ancients wore sackcloth and ashes, and fasted, to humble themselves before God, and to show their repentance from their sins, fasting during Lent is, for us, a kind of self-denial that exemplifies our contrition, and helps us to humble ourselves before God in preparation for the coming of Easter. And in the process, we pray that we will build up our spiritual muscle to be more able to say "no" to sin in the future, as Jesus was able to reject all of the temptations placed before him.

Now, all that depends on our having a consciousness of our own sinfulness; on our being prepared to put up our hand to accept responsibility for who and what we are; on our owning the mistakes and the poor choices and the deliberately bad things that we have done. Like self-discipline, that's kind of counter-cultural in the world in which we live. We are ever so reluctant to accept responsibility for our mistakes. We refuse to have blame sheeted home to us. We quickly look around for someone else we can blame. In the news during the last week was a story about companies that sell phone plans. A number of customers had complained that they'd been sold plans they couldn't afford. So they were *victims* of evil sales people who were more focused on sales than customers' needs. The customers themselves weren't to blame.

It wasn't *their* fault that they'd signed contracts they couldn't afford. It *must* be the telco's fault.

It couldn't possibly have been a poor choice they themselves had made!

Does that resonate with you? We encounter that kind of thinking every day. If someone makes a poor choice and uses illicit drugs, any harm they may suffer isn't their fault; it's the government's fault for not providing pill-testing. And the fact that the streets are awash with drugs has nothing to do with the considerable sums of money that users spend buying drugs, making it a lucrative market for criminals. The users are just innocent victims.

If we make all the wrong food choices and suffer the health consequences, it won't our fault. It will be the advertising industry and the food industry which have deceived us. If we get a speeding fine, it's not our fault: after all, everybody speeds; and if you're caught, it's the Police's fault for revenue raising at our expense. If we have too much to drink, it's the fault of the bar staff who failed in their "responsible service of alcohol" duty. None of these things could conceivably be *our* fault, the result of our own foolishness, our own poor choices, or our own bad purposes. Dare I say, our own sinfulness?

And, believe me, in schools you get it all the time from too many parents. It was never *my* child's fault: it was the teacher's fault, or the school's fault, or the fault of other kids – or of *anyone* else except my child. My child couldn't possibly be to blame. My child was a victim. And of course, my child soaks it all up, and never learns to accept responsibility for his or her choices. Everything that goes wrong in his or her life will always be someone else's

fault.

I'm sure you could all add to these few examples. But you get the point. We are not good at taking responsibility for our choices. We are not good at accepting responsibility for what we do. And nor are we good at recognising our own sinfulness and our desperate need for repentance.

So today's readings are hard for us to hear. Whether you take Jesus' temptation in the wilderness at face value, as a literal account, or whether you see it as a metaphor, really doesn't matter. The point is that it lays bare the pervasive and powerful temptations we face every day that do lure us to sin, and if we read it honestly, we know that, unlike Jesus, we do succumb all too often. We can resonate with the all temptations that were placed before Jesus.

The first temptation he faced was one of our most basic needs: food. The hungry Jesus was told, *If you are the son of God, tell this stone to become bread.* How tempting that must have been, to a man in the midst of a lengthy fast.

Hunger is a terrible thing, and we admire the strength of Jesus when he replies, *It is written, "Man does not live on bread alone."* But most of us are very fortunate and do not face the rawness of aching hunger. Yet it's amazing how, still for us, food is a powerful temptation to sinfulness.

Lauris and I know a barrister. Let's call him Mike. We were once at his home for lunch with another couple. The other man was very much involved with the movers and shakers of Sydney. Let's call him Peter. Mike, the barrister, told us how, at the end of a corporate case, he and the people representing his corporate client had gone to lunch. Around the table, it was agreed: Mike would pay for the extravagant lunch, and the guys from the company would approve his bill for one more day of court appearance than he had actually worked. Everybody could have a nice lunch, at the unknowing expense of the corporate client. So a nice lunch had led them all to surrender their integrity and their honesty; they were not hungry, but they were greedy. "You got the better end of that deal," Peter congratulated him, without any hint of reproach. Those of you in the business world will probably recognise that this is pretty common stuff. Even in a world which barely knows the meaning of hunger, food is still a powerful incentive to sin.

And so are power and prestige.

The second temptation placed before Jesus was the offer of all the authority and the splendour of all the kingdoms of the world, if only he would worship the tempter. We don't have to think too long about that one. Too many of us perversely seek positions of power, for the opportunities they provide to benefit ourselves, in whatever way our sinfulness might lead us. We see examples every day of people who sell their soul for power. They give up family and loyalties and beliefs, and in a sense even their own lives, for the allure of power and all that they believe it will deliver to them. Lord Acton's maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, is proven correct again and

again, in every generation. Our politicians sometimes seem to set the benchmark for the abuse of power; but a series of Royal Commissions has, and continues, to reveal how many powerfully placed people have wantonly abused their position. They have, metaphorically, worshiped the tempter, willingly surrendering their integrity, their character and, sometimes, their very humanity, for the temptations to which their power gives them access. There are the movers and shakers, most recently in the banking industry; but there are, too, the trusted clerics – ministers and priests and bishops – who allowed themselves to succumb to their temptations; and the teachers and workers with children; and the aged care workers. Whom will we hear of next?

So many of our previously trusted professions have been struck a body-blow, as the appalling conduct of a minority of their members has been laid bare; as we learn how they have sold their soul for riches, or sex, or for the sheer thrill of exercising power over others.

Jesus' third temptation was to put God to the test; to hurl himself from the top of the Temple, anticipating that angels would come to save him in his fall. *Do not put the Lord your God to the test*, responds Jesus. Don't presume to try to manipulate what almighty God will do. To do so would be to seek to be more powerful than God, to control God, to make God do your bidding. *Do not put the Lord your God to the test*, says Jesus. We need also to hear that injunction, because we too are all too ready to try to manipulate God. We forget that every blessing comes from God, every gift, every good thing, and we fail to give continual thanks to God for all these things. But come the inevitable hardships of life, and we're on our knees to God in prayer, asking for his intervention to put things right as we wish them to be. We forget the words of Jesus in the Garden, when, at the end of his anguished prayer, he prayed, "Not my will but thy will be done." When we have a problem, we demand that God solve it and solve it our way. We demand that God fix everything according to the blueprint we insist on. And if God doesn't comply, and comply quickly, we're tempted to feel that he's betrayed us.

If we're honest with ourselves, we need not reflect too long on today's passage to be reminded of the pervasive temptations to sin that we all face; and to recognise how easily we succumb to those temptations. Our insistence on passing the blame to someone else, and on never accepting that our own choices are what lead us astray, is laid bare by today's reading. We are sharply reminded of our sinfulness. What resonates clearly with us is the allure of sin – the allure of our own comfort, of power and wealth, of our outsized egos that seek to manipulate God himself; but what we *cannot* resonate with is the strength shown in the face of this onslaught by the one man who remained forever without sin. The account of Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness prepares us well for the coming of Lent. The bubble of self-deception with which we surround ourselves is burst, and we are brought to our knees in contrition and repentance. Forgive us Lord, for we have sinned. And perhaps, after we have enjoyed the pancakes today, we will each choose a path of sacrifice and deprivation for the period of Lent, to humble ourselves before God, and to strengthen our spiritual muscle.

Amen