

Sermon Preached at St Matthew's South Grafton
Sunday 1 March Lent 1 2020 Year A
Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



Follow Me--Satan (Temptation of Jesus Christ), Ilya Repin 1903

I hold here a cricket ball, a nice shiny new one. A new cricket ball is harder than a worn one, and is preferred by fast bowlers because of the speed and bounce of the ball off the pitch. Older balls tend to spin more as the roughness grips the pitch more when the ball bounces, and also drift more in the air, so spin bowlers prefer to use a worn ball.

I've brought it along today to remind us of the 2018 ball tampering incident, involving Australian cricket team members Cameron Bancroft, Steve Smith David Warner and in the game against South Africa.

Reflecting on the incident, Cameron Bancroft, the youngest of the 3 cricketers involved and the newest member of the Australian Cricket Team at the time, spoke about things that might have influenced his decision to tamper with the ball.

He said, "my decision was based around my values, what I valued at the time. At the time I valued fitting in. You hope that fitting in earns you respect"

If fitting in is what truly drives us, then we'll do almost anything to fit in; it will over-ride everything else.

I respect Cameron Bancroft for his honesty, in sharing this self-reflection, about the link between his values, character and behaviour. It's true for him and for all of us.

As we think about today's readings, we might ask ourselves, what influences the decisions we make?

What drives our choices?

What are our priorities?

In the readings today, Genesis and Romans in particular, the poor decisions made by Adam are explored. This decision disrupted the harmonious relationship between humanity and the creator.

In the Gospel, Jesus was so focused on his mission that Satan's contribution was more of a *distraction* than a *temptation*. Distractions from worshipping and trusting the one true God.

Jesus showed how temptations or distractions can actually strengthen our resolve to obey God's will. Like Jesus, we should use the scriptures to understand God's principles for living and what he wants us to do with our lives.

Jesus quotes scripture saying, "worship the Lord your God, and serve only him".

Note that Matthew's account here follows on from Jesus' Baptism - a reminder for us that our Baptismal promises are formative: this is where we have made the commitment to be his disciples and serve only him. What for Jesus might have been only a distraction, for us can be a real temptation. Especially as the tempter can target us at our weak moments. Yet if we keep our eyes fixed on him, everything else is a distraction.

Two things strike me about this wilderness encounter between Jesus and Satan.

The first is that the temptations (or distractions) set before Jesus are so dramatic and obvious. This is not usually so in our daily lives. Temptations, as we come across them from day to day, are often hidden by subtlety and masked by a 'me' culture of consumerism. I like Repin's painting of the Temptation as depicted above. Is Satan really there or not? There's a subtlety to the temptations that surround us in our daily lives.

John Taylor in the *Go Between God* points out that we can confront the kind of cultural relativism that masks the importance of certain choices by focusing on the difference between the *actual* and the *potential*.

An attitude of "This is the way things have always been so choosing to act this way isn't so bad" can be challenged with "imagine how much better things could be if I acted this other way!". As Taylor puts it, "stay as you are and drop out; change, however painfully, and move towards life".

In today's gospel we see Jesus choosing life, effortlessly, again and again. How can we choose life daily in our decision making?

The other thing that strikes me is the similarity to our culture today. Our daily decision making is endangered by the attractiveness of immediate gratification. Jesus was given the opportunity to instantly gratify basic human need for food, recognition and power. How often do we see that in advertising?

Credit Card Companies and loan companies and others like them, bombard us with the opportunity of having whatever we want, whenever we want it. We can get a loan now, whether we can afford it or not, and pay later. The result is short term gratification, but there are long term consequences. So too for the things offered by Satan: they might have been a quick-fix to get Jesus out of the wilderness; but the wilderness was where he needed to be right then.

Last Wednesday we observed the beginning of the season of Lent. Perhaps on Ash Wednesday this year, more than any other in recent memory, we were quite familiar with this symbol of ash. For much of the last 6 months or so, we've been breathing it in, wiping it off surfaces, or at least seeing it in the air. We're certainly familiar with the smell of it.

In the Middle Ages, some Christians used to sprinkle ashes on their food to indicate their total disdain for the pleasures of the body.

The ancient Mayans of Central America used ashes to prevent crop disease: When planting corn, they mixed the corn seeds in ashes to protect them from blight and rot. Not bad, considering they didn't know anything about the microbiology of it.

We're not planting corn and maybe we've had enough of ashes from all the fires anyway, so how can these Lenten ashes be good medicine for us?

They remind us that all the material things of this world, attractive and tempting as they may be, count for nothing in the fullness of time. Do we want to be defined by the distractions, the things that tempt us and lead us astray, or do we want to be defined and formed by the eternal things that really matter?

*Jesus was led by the Spirit
to fast forty days in the wilderness
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin;
give us grace to observe the disciplines of Lent;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who is alive with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.
Amen.*