

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

It starts with a flicker of thought, a tiny little idea that darts across the mind while you're doing something else. It seems harmless, just one of the millions of things that the human brain comes up with. But then it returns, a minute or an hour later. You feel it now as something familiar, and perhaps enticing. If I claim travel expenses for that trip, even though I had a ride from a friend...if I had a chance to say that really cutting remark to the man who's always been mean to me . . . if I played my cards right, I might persuade my friend's spouse to spend an evening with me, and then maybe . . .

Always, to begin with, it seems quite reasonable, only just a bit off limits. But if we play with the idea, or allow it to play with us, then a new course is set, heading for disaster at one level or another.

Christians have always found comfort in the fact that Jesus was tempted as we are. But his temptations, in this famous story, are not just an example, showing us how to resist, though of course they are that too. (Notice how his mind, well stocked with scripture, comes back again and again with the right response.) They are part of the larger story of how 'heaven's rule' came to earth.

Part of the point of the 'kingdom of heaven', you see, and of Jesus' own mission to make it happen, is that there was another power ruling the earth. If Jesus was to bring God's rescuing rule to the world, the present power had to be defeated. Jesus' 'temptations' are therefore the personal side of the larger battle he had to fight if God's rule was to take hold. Like David fighting Goliath, he had to take on the enemy one to one if the people as a whole were to be set free.

The three temptations here, like most if not all temptations, are good things that are being distorted. Bread is good. Jesus will later create a huge amount of it from a few loaves, to feed hungry people. But should he do that just for himself — and just to satisfy himself that he really is the 'Son of God', as the heavenly voice at his baptism had said? No: Jesus will satisfy himself with what God has said, rather than with any attempt to prove it.

So, too, Jesus may already have had a sense that his own vocation would end in a horrible death, trusting that God would raise him from the dead. But the satanic distortion of this is that he should perform a crazy stunt to attract attention. Again, Jesus refuses: that would be using God's power as magic.

Finally, it's clear throughout Matthew's gospel, and particularly at the very end, that Jesus as 'king of the Jews' is to become the true lord of the whole world. But the path by which he moves to that lordship is not the satanic one which would make him grab it for his own ends. The whole of the book is about the alternative path, the true way by which Jesus comes to embody heaven's rule on earth.

Once more, we are not simply spectators in this extraordinary drama. We, too, are tempted to do the right things in the wrong way, or for the wrong reason. Part of the discipline of Lent is about learning to recognize the flickering impulses, the whispering voices, for what they are, and

to have the scripture-fuelled courage to resist. We, too, are part of the ongoing battle for heaven's rule to be established on earth. Every successful fight against temptation is one more step on the road to the ultimate victory.

TODAY

Lord Jesus, as you saw through the temptations and refused them, give us wisdom to recognize the tempter's voice, and strength to resist.