



First Sunday in Lent– February 21st, 2021

Reverend Peter Hanna

“He was in the wilderness forty days tempted by Satan”

Modern men and women today have a problem - most don't want to believe in the devil or Satan any more. Even the Church of England has removed reference to the devil from its latest baptismal service, preferring instead to refer just to the rejection of sin and evil. This move has come about, we are told, because a number of clergy said it was easier not to ask parents and godparents at a baptismal service to “reject the devil”, as most did not believe in his existence. But to deny the existence of the devil, as a personalised form of evil, doesn't mean he is gone or that he no longer exists.

As the rhyme puts it so well,

*We don't believe in the devil now,
The devil's dead and gone.
But thoughtful folk would like to know,
Who carries his business on?*

One would have to be very sheltered indeed not to realise that the business of sin and evil and temptation are indeed being carried on in our world today, as they were when Jesus set out on his world changing mission.

Sin is the outcome of giving in to temptation.

It is what happened to Adam and Eve. Now Adam and Eve may not have existed as identifiable persons, but their story is humankind's story, it is our story, of how easy it is to be taken in. It is where Satan enters in.





He led them to believe that they could be like God, gaining the ability to know the difference between right and wrong, knowledge that God had told them was reserved for Him, and Him alone.

The consequence was that they weren't able to control the knowledge they had stolen, they let sin enter the world, and the pattern for our behaviour today was set. First human relationships were damaged, as the man and woman were no longer at ease in each other's company, symbolised by the realisation of their nakedness. The world became a hostile place, "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground". The perfect relationship they had with God is gone, as they are punished by being driven from paradise.

The blame culture develops – the man blames the woman; the woman blames the devil. Indeed, the man practically blames God – "*the woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree*". And then death enters when one of their children, Cain, murders his brother.

And that is where we are today, relationships with God and with each other are flawed, work is a necessity, - and it can be hard, - we live in a blame culture, – blaming one another instead of accepting responsibility for our actions, and sadly murder is a daily occurrence.

In the Gospel I have just read we learn that immediately after his baptism by John, Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he was tempted, tested by Satan. There is no doubt that Jesus believed in the devil's existence. In Matthew's Gospel, where we have a fuller version of the temptation, the devil offers Jesus all the secular power and protection and wealth of the world, provided he bows down and worships him. Each temptation is introduced with the words, "*If you are the Son of God,*" – a cynical attempt to sow doubt in the mind of Jesus.



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And that devilish invitation was there when Jesus was crucified, *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross”*.

Jesus rejects each offer and dismisses Satan.

Had he given in at any stage, all would have been lost and we would have no way out of our sins. But he didn't, he steadfastly resisted evil and finally defeated it on the cross, inviting us to share in the victory of his resurrection. As Peter put it in words from our second reading, *“Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”*

So, when you feel tempted, tempted perhaps to let the secular world have its way and direct your life, remember that Jesus overcame that temptation on your behalf.

As St. Paul puts it so well,

“And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will provide you with a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

As we begin Lent let us start by accepting the existence of the devil and by soundly rejecting him!

As Jesus said,

“Away with you, Satan!

For it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only”.

