



# DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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## Temptation

Mark 1.9-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 5 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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When I was a child I had a picture-book of the Lord's Prayer. On the page for 'Lead us not into temptation' there was a picture of a boy with short pants looking over his shoulder to check for his mother's reappearance while his hands ransacked the cookie jar. I think that picture, and others like it, can shape our whole idea of what temptation means. It characterizes temptation as quick, furtive, and rooted in greed. It leaves us feeling dirty, fearful, ashamed, and with a little bit of indigestion. I think there's rather more to be said about temptation than that.

What I'd like to do today is to describe the story of Mark's gospel; and then go on to show how Mark's story is our story; and finally to show how Mark's story redefines what we think of as temptation and how we are to overcome it.

Mark's story is, in fact, three interwoven stories. First of all, there is Jesus' creation of a new community, based around the messianic hopes of his preaching. He calls around him 12 disciples and commissions them to spread the fire of his kingdom. The disciples falter and stumble, out of fear of the cross, lack of imagination, and cold betrayal. But in Mark's account of the resurrection there is promise of a restored community in Galilee.

The second story is Jesus' mission to the crowd, the teeming mass of poor and oppressed whom, as I noted a couple of weeks ago, Mark mentions 38 times in his gospel. This is a ministry of healing, exorcism and liberation, through story, announcement and gesture. On Palm Sunday the crowd seem to have taken up the cause of liberation, but by Good Friday they have chosen the terrorist Barabbas instead.

The third interwoven story is Jesus' confrontation with the powers that held Israel in a stranglehold. One by one Jesus takes on the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. He dismantles their authority and challenges their control, but eventually the veil of pretence is pulled aside and behind emerges the real power in Israel, the power that toys with all other powers – the iron fist of Rome. It is the nails and wood of Roman execution that finally destroy Jesus – only for him to dismantle even Rome's control over life and death.

These three stories, of disciples, crowd and authorities, are interwoven in Mark's gospel like three strands in a rope. Each finds its climax in the account of Jesus' passion. The three stories in the end comprise one story. And that story is the sending of Jesus by the Father, crystallized in the Father's words at Jesus' baptism, 'You are my beloved son', epitomized and in the Father's words at the Transfiguration, 'This is my beloved son', and climaxing in the centurion's words at the cross, 'Truly this man was God's son!' Jesus' intimacy with the disciples, his mission to the crowd and his confrontation with the authorities are all dimensions of his being at the heart of God.

So that's the story of Mark's gospel – three stories united in one. But I said that I was going to show how this story is our story. So listen carefully: you'll notice our story divides into the same three strands as Mark's story – discipleship, issues of poverty, and conflict.

First we reflect Mark's gospel by being part of a group of disciples. When we become a Christian we are called into intimate relationship. We may already have close family ties, and our call to follow the man from Nazareth may intensify and strengthen these existing relationships, or it may test and challenge them. But either way, we are called to make new, close and accountable relationships with members of Christ's Church. These may earn the name friendships; on the other hand they may never become friendships, just stubborn, intractable and sometimes downright irritating relationships with people who remind us of stubborn, intractable and sometimes downright irritating things like showing up at worship on Sunday and tithing our income and praying for our enemies. During the Lenten season we take stock of our Christian life. And when we take stock of our intimate life, we must ask, 'Am I part of an accountable group or network of relationships? Am I part of a 'group of disciples' in any meaningful sense?

And then, second, we reflect Mark's gospel by attending to the crowd, by being in relationship with the poor and oppressed. There are all sorts of ways to do this. I guess the characteristic Duke way would be to invent a diluting agent that meant vaccines didn't need to be refrigerated and so more than the current 50% of vaccines might actually reach those in hot countries whose lives depend on them. Another Duke way would be to seek to alter legislation affecting the status of migrant farmworkers in rural North Carolina. A way well known to the Congregation at Duke Chapel would be to serve meals at the soup kitchen in Durham. But the relationship that brings about real change is friendship, because to be a friend is to say 'I am allowing myself to be changed by knowing you'. When we take stock of our relationship with the poor and oppressed during Lent, we ask ourselves 'Do I have friendships with people very different from myself, people to whom I say "I am allowing myself to be changed by knowing you"?"

And then, third, we reflect Mark's gospel by attending to Jesus' confrontation with the Jerusalem authorities of his day. We seem to have picked up an idea that holiness is a trance-like sense of peace and wellbeing in relation to all around you, an experience of floating on a magic carpet of tranquillity. Wherever that picture of holiness came from, it certainly wasn't Mark's gospel. Jesus is constantly having heated debates with everyone who held Israel in check. The one thing everyone seems to agree on today is that there's plenty wrong with the world. There's only two responses to this – either go and put it right yourself, or, if you can't, make life pretty uncomfortable for those who can until they do. When we take stock of our relationship with the powerful this Lent, we ask ourselves 'Does the shape of my life reflect my longing to see God set people free, and do I challenge those who keep others in slavery?'

And just as for Mark's gospel, these three strands, the strands of accountable community, friendship with the poor, and challenge to the powerful, all unite in the fundamental story, which is our commissioning by God in our baptism, our sharing the of mystery of God in the transfiguration of our lives of service, and our entering the glory of God in our death and resurrection. But Mark's gospel teaches us that *this fundamental story cannot be lived except through the three strands of the story, except through accountable community, except through friendship with the poor, except through challenge to the powerful*. Of course Christianity is about 'my relationship with God', but there's no such thing as 'my relationship with God' except as mediated through accountable community, friendship with the poor, and challenge to the powerful. Jesus' relationship with God was expressed, discovered, revealed through accountable community, friendship with the poor, and challenge to the powerful. Why should ours be any different? Do we really think we have come up with a better way?

And that brings us to the question of temptation. I know, I know. You've not been paying attention for the last ten minutes because your imagination has been captivated by the picture of Dean Wells as a little boy in short pants looking round furtively for his mother while his sticky hand ransacks the cookie jar. I guess that picture describes temptation because really it's stealing – the cookies really belong to the little boy's mother and his greed makes him ignore that. But what about when the little boy grows up, and the cookies really do belong to him? Surely it doesn't hurt anyone to have another cookie – even a chocolate one, with caramel just under the chocolate, and a little grated coconut on top? Somehow adulthood becomes a calculation of whether anyone gets hurt. Does it hurt anyone to drive a car fast on an empty road, to sleep with some of the best looking people in the Engineering School over the course of a few weekends, to blow a couple of hundred dollars on a pretty wild night in D.C., to rent an apartment that's way out of our income range? And once we've checked out that no one gets hurt, and thus that it's none of anyone's business to pass comment, we're left alone in a sea that should be called desire but in fact is usually called anxiety, because once capitalism has made greed a necessity and a virtue we're all anxious because we haven't got enough.

We think we're free, with this new gospel of 'it doesn't hurt anybody'. But what we've done, if you look at it closely, is that we've insulated ourselves from accountable community, by making sure those around us can never criticize us. And we've insulated ourselves from friendship with the poor, because we never count the poor into the equation when we're thinking about who does or doesn't get hurt: we seldom remember that the most common form of hurt is neglect. And we've insulated ourselves from making any challenge to the powerful, because by thoughtlessly joining our contemporary culture of acquisitiveness and gratification and rapid consumption we are simply lining the pockets of those who make their money and keep their stranglehold on political influence by promoting that culture.

And then – wait for it, but don't condemn it too harshly, because we've all done it – then we have the extraordinary temerity to look at the big story – our baptism, our participation in the mystery of God, our future in God beyond

death – and say we are a Christian, even though we have done next to nothing to reflect the ways Jesus mapped out the contours of what the life made possible by his ministry means. Temptation means trying to have the big story, walking with God, without the stories that make up the big story – participation in an accountable community, friendship with the poor, and challenge to the powerful. Temptation is wanting to have all the benefits of Christian faith without any of the costs. Temptation is making God into a cookie jar. Temptation is trying to have God without Jesus.

But there's also another side of the coin. Getting any one of the strands out of proportion is also a temptation. Look at intimate community. We can easily fall into thinking that's all that matters. We can surround ourselves with people like us. We can spend our whole energy trying to make church or family a featherbed of insulated fuzziness. Or we can even think intimacy is good in itself, that it doesn't much matter who we are intimate with, if our feelings are genuine and strong. This is the height of self-deception. When we make intimacy or community an end in themselves, we fall into temptation.

It's the same in regard to friendship with the poor. At some stage this must be harmonized with accountable community and challenge to the powerful. Discipleship isn't a lone quest, a wandering off into the ocean of need, a kind of cleansing by the fire of human pain. When we have discovered the depth of human need, we must not just give in to the temptation of anger or despair but gather a community of partners and confront those who maintain a pattern of oppression.

And again, in relation to challenging the powerful, while we must resist the temptation always to avoid conflict and be popular and say what people want to hear, we must not fall into thinking that there's always a simple explanation and the powerful are always to blame. We must not assume there's a theory that justifies our anger if such a theory tempts us to neglect our own friendship with the poor and commitment to accountable community.

All of these are temptations to have just part of the gospel – just the community bit, just the poverty bit, or just the cage-rattling bit – without the rest. You could say they are temptations to remake Jesus in the image of our own needs and obsessions. They take one of the three strands and ignore the big story. It is the temptation to have Jesus without God.

So, on the first Sunday of Lent, when we examine our Christian lives in the light of God's life, and we examine our story in the light of Jesus' story, Mark's gospel leaves those of us who worship at Duke Chapel with these three questions. Number one: Am I a disciple? – That is, am I member of a group of people, a religious life meeting or some other fellowship that holds me to account and challenges me to put my life where my mouth is? Or do I surround myself with people who say things I want to hear? Number two: Am I a friend of the poor? Have I said to a single person, for whom life is a daily struggle and burden, 'I am allowing myself to be changed by knowing you'? Am I spending time on that person's territory, taking seriously what God is doing in that person's life, and asking how I can help? Number three: Am I confronting oppression? Am I a thorn in the side of those who abuse and manipulate and extort and neglect? Or does the way I spend my money and the lifestyle I unthinkingly adopt simply underwrite and collude in patterns of exploitation and degradation?

We want to cut these strands of the story out. We want to cut out Mark's story and skip straight on to Easter. We want to cut straight to the cookie jar. But first we've got Lent. Time to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask hard questions. Am I really a disciple? Am I a really friend of the poor? Am I really confronting oppression? In other words, Am I really following Jesus? We've got 40 days to sort this out. Let's get on with it.