

1st Sunday of Lent

In case we were in any doubt that Lent has well and truly begun, today's readings hit us with two heavy topics - Sin and the devil! Two nice easy topics for me to preach on! Where do we start?! Maybe with a question - What do you picture when you think of the devil?... A quick Google search brought up a whole lot of images, some scary, but lots that were kind of cute, red, horns, long tail, pitchfork. In reality, of course, the Bible tells us the devil is a spiritual being. He appears in various forms - but never with a pitchfork!



One of the best images I've ever come across came from Sylvia, a dear, elderly lady in my curacy church. Sylvia had an amazing relationship with God. She always referred to the devil as 'Sooty Paws.' Sylvia would tell of a time she had just mopped the kitchen floor. It was lovely and shiny, when suddenly her cat came in from the garden, leaving his muddy footprints all over it. Sylvia remembers God saying quite clearly to her, 'That's what the devil does Sylvia. He leaves his dirty footprints, wherever he goes', hence the name 'Sooty Paws.' The Devil messes up our clean floor.

Before we think about how he does that, we need to think for a minute about sin. What it is and what it does. If we'd lived 100 years ago, sin would have been a major topic. There was lots of hellfire and damnation preaching. There would have been talk of the 7 deadly sins, particularly lust – well sex in general – very bad!! There would have been lots of talk of hell. People were terrified of God. He was an angry, ruthless, judge, just waiting for you to mess up. Nowadays, we've perhaps swung too far the other way. There's very little mention of sin in our services, except at the Confession and almost no mention of hell.

Well, if there's one thing we can be sure of, it's that, whatever sin is, we all do it. As Paul says, 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). As today's readings remind us, humans have sinned since the very beginning. It's what we do.

But what is sin? The Hebrew word literally means "to miss the mark." We miss the target, we fall short. Our purpose as human beings is to bring God glory and enjoy God's presence forever. That's the target, the bullseye. Sin, then is anything, thoughts, words, deeds, which pull us off target. Anything that falls short of bringing God glory or draws us away from God. The world is full of temptations that draw us off course. Paths which seem more appealing, easier, than living lives which bring God glory. Paths which go against God's good plans for us and the world. The Garden of Eden is the classic example, humans thinking we know best what's good for us, turning away from God's way and going it alone.

What we sometimes forget is that God's rules aren't about power but about love. It's like any parent and child. Rules aren't made to make a child's life miserable, but to keep them safe, to allow them to thrive. Children may not see it that way, when they're not allowed their phone in their bedroom or hours on social media. God knows what is good or bad for us way more than we do. When we decide we know better, God doesn't love us any less, but it harms us, it stops us thriving. It harms our relationship with God. God's boundaries are there for a reason.



So where does old Sooty Paws fit into this picture? We might think of the classic picture of the devil sitting on one shoulder, an angel on the other. Which voice should we listen to? But actually, he's much more subtle than that. He's crafty, really sly. Let's look at some of his tactics in today's readings.

In the Garden of Eden, he doesn't directly attack Eve's relationship with God. That would be too obvious. Instead, he subtly twists God's words - 'Did God REALLY say....?' Surely he didn't mean that? He then goes in for the kill - 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat the fruit ...you will be like God.' It's very clever. He subtly plants distrust of God, of God's

motivations, God's goodness. Sooty Paws is great at chipping away at our belief in God's love and goodness. He plants doubt. Perhaps, after all, God is judging, angry, disappointed in us?

He plants doubt too about our own identity. In the Wilderness, he says to Jesus 'If you are the Son of God...' This is one of his most powerful strategies, planting little seeds of doubt about our identity as God's children. Surely God can't really love you? Can God really forgive you? It's clever. If our identity isn't in God, we seek it elsewhere, a path which inevitably leads away from God.

We might think the Bible is a pretty safe place. But notice in the wilderness he uses this too - 'It is written...' Throughout history the Bible has been misused. It's been quoted in support of slavery, racism, nationalism. That's why Bible study with others is so important, to make sure we're not being led off course.

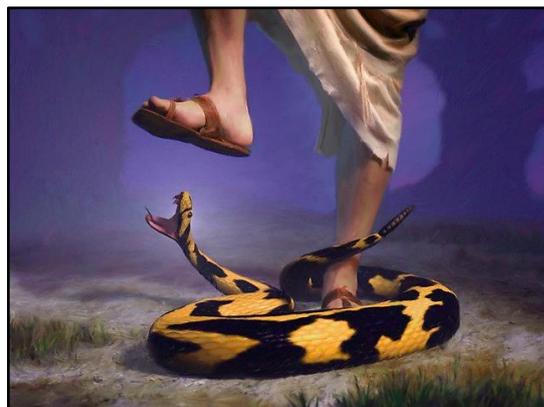
Perhaps the devil's most clever tactic though is using our vulnerabilities to draw us away from God. We all have weaknesses which make it hard to resist certain types of temptation. They might be physical weaknesses. The devil knows Jesus is starving, so he tempts him with bread. He tempts him to self-reliance, rather than reliance on God's provision. They might be emotional vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem. Satan tries to lure Jesus to seek power and glory. The world tells us that power, influence, success make us valuable. The lure of power and success is a path which inevitably leads away from the God who gives us real value and worth. Perhaps our vulnerability is loneliness, or busyness, or perfectionism. Perhaps it's a particular attitude or behaviour or way of coping with life. But whatever it is, old Sooty Paws knows exactly which buttons to push, to trigger our doubt, anger, jealousy, lust, whatever...

So the devil is crafty. He'll try anything to distract us from God, to tempt us away from right path, to make us doubt God or ourselves. So what on earth do we do about it? Well, first thing we remember that Sooty Paws is frankly a loser. Jesus has already won the war, Sooty's time is short. That's why his attempts are so desperate.

Second, we need to learn from Jesus, how to resist temptation. The devil comes to Jesus after 40 days in the wilderness. He strikes when he thinks Jesus is at his most vulnerable. But it's a huge miscalculation. He may have been physically weak, but spiritually his batteries were fully charged. Jesus has just spent 40 days drawing near to God. Setting aside time with God, gives us the spiritual strength to fight temptation. Of course Lent is the perfect opportunity to do just that. Through prayer, self-reflection, repentance, reading, study – whatever our practice, Lent offers us the chance to reconnect, to draw near to God. It's a golden opportunity.

Third, we need to be alert to Sooty's tactics. That way, we can quickly recognise when we're being tempted, when he's pushing our buttons, when he's sowing seeds of doubt and we can run back to God as fast as our feet can carry us.

Finally, above all else, we need to trust in God, and who we are in him. Jesus' resistance to temptation comes from a place of certainty that he is God's son. He knows he has nothing to fear from Satan. As children of God, nothing can separate us from his love. Whatever Sooty Paws throws at us, no matter how many times take wrong path, there's always a way back. Jesus has conquered. We have nothing to fear. Amen.



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