

Luke 4:1-13

In the mid 1990's the movie, *Devil's Advocate*, was released starring Keanu Reeves and Al Pacino. Reeves plays Kevin Lomax, a happily married and very successful lawyer in America's South. Down in the South he's a man of integrity who's focussed on what's important in life. Then he's offered a job in the Big Apple, New York, with a world wide law firm. Kevin and his wife move to New York only to find Kevin being seduced by the atmosphere of greed, sex and power that surrounds the firm, and more particularly it's owner, John Milton, played by Al Pacino.

But we soon discover that there is more to this movie than the age old theme of greed versus goodness. The plot is much more sinister. It turns out that John Milton

is in fact the Devil, a devil who has learned to despise God and embrace self satisfaction.

During the movie the Devil lets us in on his plan to seduce humanity. “You sharpen the human appetite to the point where it can split atoms with its desire; you build egos the size of cathedrals; fibre-optically connect the world to every eager impulse; grease even the dullest dreams with these dollar-green, gold-plated fantasies, until every human becomes an aspiring emperor, becomes his own God... And as we’re straddling from one deal to the next, who’s got his eye on the planet, as the air thickens, the water sours, and even the bees’ honey takes on the metallic taste of radioactivity? And it just keeps coming, faster and faster. There’s no chance to think, to prepare; it’s buy futures, sell futures, when there is no future!

“Look at me” cries the Devil, “underestimated from Day One! You’d never think I was a master of the universe, now, would you? I’m a surprise, Kevin. They don’t see me coming: that’s what you’re missing.”¹

In Southern Mexico lies the Cave of the Lighted House. As you make your way to the cave you walk through a veritable paradise of tropical birds and lush rain forest. Underwater the cave is fed by 20 underground springs, beautiful watercourses which teem with tiny fish. The cave itself is home to spectacular rock formations and beautiful ponds. The environment is inviting. Yet accept the invitation and you’ll soon be dead. You see, the Cave of the Lighted House is filled with poisonous gases.

¹ *Devil's Advocate* 1997 Warner

Temptation is just like this. It presents itself to us as something inviting, attractive, life giving. Yet in reality it's poisonous and toxic.²

Temptation thrives on the choice it offers. Do you wish to be free - to be able to make the choice to move to a better job with greater benefits; to be able to roam to beautiful places for your enjoyment, your pleasure - or do you wish to be enslaved - Restricted by the fear of making a wrong step? That's how it appears to us, but it's all a charade. The devil, Satan, the personification of evil is the deceiver; that's what 'Satan' means. The choice presented to us, is in fact itself, a lie.

The story of Jesus' temptation speaks on that personal level to all of us. It also addresses the issue of the validity of Jesus' calling. If he was not able to resist the

² *National Geographic*, May 2001

temptations then the truth of God's proclamation at his baptism, "That this is my Son, in whom I am well pleased" is shattered. There is a very obvious difficulty with the story as it stands. It is recorded by Luke and the other evangelists but no third party was present to witness it! Jesus could be the only source for the story or it could be the evangelists have created the story to explore the nature of Jesus' tested call. We picture the devil in full three dimensional form, don't we? I can remember the Sunday School literature very well. There was the devil sitting beside the blonde haired, praying Jesus, dressed in red, dark-haired with a little pointy beard. There was no other way an eight year old could grasp the encounter but for us the Satan, surely, is active in the mind, suggesting and coaxing a response from us. Pasolini's great film *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* is particularly effective in this because it is

Jesus and his internal conflict that emerges from this scene. We are not drawn to a fork-tailed figure but into Jesus' torment and that is truly where the battle was fought.

The season of Lent has begun and no doubt some of you will have decided to give up a luxury for Lent. And that can be a good thing especially if it involves a beneficial change of diet! But Lent is primarily not about 'giving up' as much as it is about 'picking up'. What new thing are you involved in that is going to enhance your life and strengthen your faith?

The three temptations that Jesus was assailed with are very interesting. We read the passage subconsciously conditioned to boo the devil and his offers. It's the right response, isn't it? But a closer look at the questions may reveal more of the kind of conundrum Jesus found himself in. After all, wasn't Jesus' mission

to feed the hungry, to rule with justice and to rely on God's power to see him through? Didn't the devil's offers deliver on all three of these objectives?

We all see the priority of tackling poverty and addressing hunger. That's why we support food bank provision in Moray. We all believe in just rule that's why we live for the kingdom of God. We all believe that God will never forsake us that's why we're prepared to do things that make us uncomfortable. How powerful those temptations were! Do you know that all of the temptations became aspirations fulfilled in Jesus Christ? The hungry are, and will be fed; he does, and will rule with justice, his Father came to his rescue on the Easter morning as he rose triumphant from the grave.

The key was understanding that succumbing to temptation enslaves whilst choosing God's way brings freedom. It's counter-intuitive to our sinful nature but

it's the only way to life. How many people are stuck in their wilderness experience today? Remember the people of Israel went round and round in circles in the sand for forty years. Where is your wilderness experience? Can you ever see a way out of it? There is a sense in which all of our lives are lived in wilderness wanderings. We don't like the thought of that but it is the truth.

Historian Shelby Foote tells of a soldier who was wounded at the battle of Shiloh during the American Civil War and was ordered to go to the rear. The fighting was fierce and within minutes he returned to his commanding officer. "Captain, give me a gun!" he shouted. "This fight ain't got any rear!"³

It's true we can't just miss this bit out!

³ Daily Walk, July 10, 1993

But the promised land is before us. Our destination is secure there, because our Lord Jesus made right choices over forty days. He has come through it all for us and he promises to take us through it as well. May you draw strength and comfort from him this Lent. Amen.