

Temptation is said to manifest itself in such a broad, and seemingly unrelated, set of circumstances that its function within our language can often appear uncertain, eluding any convenient definition. Chocolate cakes, lay ins and bad refereeing decisions are all possible occasions for temptation. Or are they? Does a cake tempt us in the same manner in which a bad refereeing decision might? Is it not possible to suggest that a lay in, within the language of temptation, can simultaneously appear both inviting and repelling? What can we say is common to these examples, what informs us that we are speaking of temptation in each scenario? The way temptation is structured into our expressions suggests that wherever it occurs, there is an arousal from outside that seems to exercise a certain control over our willing, which beckons us to act in an uncharacteristic way. I would suggest that such a description of temptation as an alien power that is unrelated to our essential personalities is a description that is rooted in self-deception. It's a convention that can be comically ludicrous at times by its overt untruthfulness: 'the smell of the chips practically dragged me into the fish and chip shop'; but deeply harmful on other occasions: 'the watch was so impressive I had no choice but to steal it.' The theme lying at the heart of all such narratives is obvious enough – it is an attempt to defer responsibility in the hope of burying the fact that in these moments we are utterly self-interested.

At the end of the day there is nothing more appealing to me than a cold pint of Guinness. But scarcely would I have wiped the frothy moustache, left from the first sip, from my lip, than Rob, the barman, would sigh disapprovingly, exclaiming that: 'I don't know how you

could drink that stuff!' (Rob's inconceivable response clearly demonstrates that this example is purely hypothetical!) However, the very fact that Rob's response could be imagined (however difficult that may be!), demonstrates that there is no causal necessity between what is extrinsic to us and our 'uncharacteristic' desiring. Thus temptation is consciously and wilfully desired by us. The arbitrary objects of temptation have no real power of their own, the extent of their power lies almost entirely within our decision of how much we choose to afford to them. Thus St. James, in his epistle, notes that 'one is tempted by one's own desire.' (James 1:14-17) Why then does temptation appear to be connected with our attempts at self deception? This relationship seems to imply, somewhat paradoxically, that in the midst of wayward desiring, we can somehow recognise that this *is* wayward desiring. 'I shouldn't really...but, go on then.' How strange the scenario is, that we would appear to desire two opposing things simultaneously. We want what we don't really want and we don't really want what we want! Think of St. Paul's 'I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.' (Rom 7:19) Or St. Augustine's 'grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.' (Confessions 8, 7:17) Undoubtedly, something has to give, and it's usually our conscience that is first to go; it becomes an almost unbearable torment if we remain within this tension for too long. Thus it is easier for us, self-centred as we are, to simply remove the cause of such tension so that harmony can return. Thus Christ says 'if I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin.' (John 15:22) Here are the seeds which would ultimately lead to Christ's murder. Or

similarly, if Socrates had not existed, then the Athenians would once again be wise and their ignorance concealed; it was easier for them to kill Socrates, than it was to face the destruction of their deluded self portraits. Thus, it is easier for us to despise and remove the cause of our exposure, than it is to amend ourselves. Why are we disposed to take the former position and not the latter? It appears that we simply fear being vulnerable, uncertain, and insecure. Our fear is rooted in our inability to trust and be at ease in any other situation than the ones we can control (of course, this myth of control is just another aspect of our self-deception). It is much simpler for us to seek security in ourselves, than for us to trust or reach out in our vulnerability. This reality, where the very occurrence of temptation is possible, paired with a fear or mistrust of uncertainty, highlights that something is drastically amiss.

What we encounter in the Gospel narratives is of course, not the absence of temptation for Christ ('he himself was tempted by what he suffered' – Heb 2:18) but, rather, the cessation of temptations' ability to exercise power. Thus in Christ, an enacted will or desire contrary to that of God's (which is always the good) could not be imagined. Sin could not be imagined. And this is precisely what God, through Christ, summons us to desire – that the possibility of temptation or willing against the good, should no longer be imagined by us. For in the Lord's Prayer we petition for precisely that: God's will be done and that we should not fall into temptation. The possibility of us responding to this summons is provided for us by God's pure gift of himself.

All of Christ's temptations appear to be marked with a response quite different from the usual human reply. Often we conveniently imagine God's will to be synonymous with our own, which leads us back into our self-deceptive security. But with Christ, when the depth of darkness and bewilderment increase, so does his ardent trust in God. Thus on the brink of starvation, he refuses Satan's invitation to turn stone into bread; in the utter despair of Gethsemane, where failure and disaster appear the only likely outcomes, Christ utters 'thy will be done'. He continually refuses the 'obvious' path to self security and yet, his fear and dread could not have been any less intense than our own experience of such circumstances, for it is *our* humanity that he assumes in his Incarnation. Of course, without Easter morning this can be nothing more than tragic naivety that truly does end in catastrophe. But In many ways Lent is something of an arrow towards Easter morning; Christ's 'thy will be done' in the face of darkness does not ultimately end in silence;.....'He Is Risen' is God's response. And it is this response and only this response, that permits us to participate in Christ's courage. So in the face of temptation, fear and uncertainty we are offered a new vision of what it is to be human; to look outwards, to trust, to love – all founded on God's incomparable gratuitousness in the reality of the Easter morning greeting. Of course, this doesn't make temptation any less real or any easier to overcome in our individual experiences and that is why the Church encourages Lent to be a time for prayerful attentiveness to our total need of God in overcoming these temptations. So as the great desert ascetic, Macarius the Egyptian, once said: having seen a bird flying in the sky we may desire to do the same, but not having wings, it remains impossible for

us to rise and take flight, as though we may be willing (like St. Paul or St. Augustine) we do not, in ourselves, have the capacity to achieve what we wish. Thus, unless God grants us his grace to accomplish our holy desires, then we would remain forever rooted to the ground. Therefore, Macarius encourages us to pray 'for the wings of the dove, his Holy Spirit, so that we may fly to him and be at rest.'