

Desert Challenge 2: The New Israel

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Year C, 6 March 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Romans 10: 4-13; Luke 4: 1-15

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The parents and grandparents present don't need me to tell them how huge video games have become—and not just for children. I know an archdeacon who's an accomplished online gamer (not in this diocese!). ABC Classic has a Friday afternoon program devoted to the vast world of video game music, and its presenter, Mina Shamali, was once asked why gaming is so popular. He answered that it's more involving than stories, films and TV shows because it's interactive and we get caught up in it. You find yourself inhabiting an alternative reality, as part of it. That's how I want us to approach today's Gospel of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness—not just as one man's struggle that we look at from the outside, but as a divine-human encounter in which we share Jesus' challenges and we're invited to share his winning strategy in the game.

We might call this game “Desert Challenge 2.” “Desert Challenge 1” featured Israel in its wilderness wanderings, where it never quite managed to remain faithful to the God who was encouraging and training Israel as it journeyed to the land of promise. Other popular video games in the same series are “Expulsion 1”, about Judah's exile to Babylon, and “Expulsion 2,” about how this big Old Testament theme of exile was applied to Adam and Eve in a prequel. Here, today, Jesus joins this exile with his people, and their wandering in the desert—which isn't just physical geography; it's political geography, with the desert meaning remoteness, irrelevance, political powerlessness.

And like video games that love their supernatural characters and larger-than-life storylines, here we're invited into Jesus' confrontation with the human condition at its depth, but it's presented as confronting a dark force, though with all the subtle moves. The three temptations are really the one, old temptation showing three of its main faces. To forget who God is and who we are as God's people is the big temptation, inviting us to experience human life in terms of difficulty, powerlessness and uncertainty, so that we seek to self-medicate, to grab for power and status, and to take whatever risks if that will make things less complicated and more straightforward.

The three temptations that Jesus faces share a common root, as does his response. The common root is the desire to secure and justify our own existence, which Paul links to the curse of the law in today's epistle. We even use our religion in these ways: as an opiate, as Marx knew; for status, and to keep uncertainty at bay—as Paul knew well in his critique of how the law gets misused.

Jesus and Paul both understood that looking to the grace and mercy of God is the right strategy in this game, and the only reliable alternative to striving and failing with the wrong attitude. Our Deuteronomy reading reminds us today of that wandering Aramean Jacob, whose Jewish descendants were enslaved in Egypt, from a game called “Death on the Nile 1”—Agatha Christie, of course, gave us “Death on the Nile 2”. Anyway, we read that Jacob witnessed the faithfulness of God who delivers and blesses, as did our Psalmist today, too, so that thankful, generous obedience to this God is the most reliable basis for life among God's people. Sadly, the Deuteronomy game kicks off a demanding series of games throughout the Old Testament which

everybody pretty much loses—the Deuteronomy rules are just too hard. But today, in “Desert Challenge 2,” Jesus, the new Israel, wins this game, unlike the Old Israel in “Desert Challenge 1.” And by confidently following his lead through the challenges and temptations, we can share in his victory.

Now, let’s take a quick look at these three temptations, or three versions of the one big and constant temptation. What might they look like for us today?

The first temptation is about resenting or despairing of how difficult life can be, and how tempting it can be to yield, to give up in the face of that difficulty. So, it’s bread if we’re hungry, a double whisky or a good gossip if we’re frustrated, and a whole range of supposedly comforting behaviours if we’re feeling anxious or empty, so many of which are available on the internet—from shopping to porn. All are avoidant; all are based on an unrealistic, perhaps even scandalised view of the limitations our human condition imposes.

My friend Chris, the academic philosopher and one-time drug addict, testifies that he was always trying to make himself feel better, until one day in a rehab session the counsellor gave him his breakthrough insight: instead of *feeling* better, it was about *getting* better. And Jesus is about helping us to get better, by sharing his confidence in God and his refusal to be scandalised by the challenging nature of being human. This is the cultivation of giving thanks, as we saw in our Deuteronomy reading today—and giving thanks is what *Eucharist* means, by the way.

Then there’s Jesus’ second temptation: to seek power over the nations. We’re seeing a controversial game like this right now called “Back in the USSR”, and another called “Make America Great Again.” Players of these games can enjoy storming Ukraine, or the US Capitol Building, all because they feel disempowered, disadvantaged, inadequate, no longer the persons of significance that they were once used to being. There are similar games set in more domestic environments, like “Child Custody,” and there’s “Take That”—the popular domestic violence game. The weak and the narcissists flock to these games, seeking to get their threatened mojo back, to allay their secret fears about being insignificant.

But in “Desert Challenge 2” Jesus has already refused to play by these rules by heading into the desert, into the biblical theatre of powerlessness, and there he answers the challenge by showing where power really lies. Not in some fool venture, not in pursuit of the absent being that Jean-Paul Sartre identified. But instead to accept the constraints of our human condition, our limited being, as the condition of our existence in this wonderful world, as a gift and blessing from God, not resenting the fragility and powerlessness and insignificance that come with the magnificent gift of human life.

We hear at the end of today’s Gospel that the tempter departs from Jesus until an opportune time. And that time, of course, is the return of temptation as Jesus faces the cross, which not only means physical death but horror, shame, and failure. Yet all this Jesus does out of love for God and for us—not resiling from the difficulty, the powerlessness, the uncertainty—because he trusts God. And Easter Day means that we can trust him, when the power of evil receives its decisive comeuppance and humanity’s future is forever taken up into God’s life, forever safe in God’s hands.

Finally, another version of this pervasive temptation, the third we see Jesus facing, is the temptation to give up everything for certainty. Go up to the top of the Temple and throw yourself

down—all doubts and perplexities will then be resolved. But of course they're not, as we're surprised to find ourselves plunging to our deaths.

Now, of course the limitedness of human knowing really is an important issue, which modern science and philosophy perennially struggle with. But fearing uncertainty and complexity needn't make us go and do mad things, like jump off the Temple. Satan loves human sacrifice, by the way, as Rene Girard tells us. In fact, Satan *is* the perennial culture of human sacrifice—and here he wants to turn Jesus, and us, into new Temple sacrifices, coaxed into jumping to our deaths. Still, though, we embrace fool causes and conspiracy theories because they reduce a complex world to the limit of our biases and bigotries. Jean-Paul Sartre, writing on anti-Semitism—but it could equally be racism, sexism or homophobia—said that this is all about fear: fear of consciousness and its burdens, of liberty, of our instincts, of our responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, of the world. Kierkegaard said something similar about anxiety, as the fear of having to choose—which is why advertising offers to make our choices for us. Rene Girard would point to the near impossibility of having to find our own way and not just follow the herd mind. But still we take big risks just to avoid unpopularity—or perhaps to avoid conflict or unpleasantness, signing bad contracts or sticking with bad relationships even when we know we shouldn't, because making tough, independent decisions with potentially complicated life consequences is too much for us to face.

And this failure extends from the personal realm to the global one. Hence our lemming-like stumbling toward the precipice of irreversible climate change, as if the angels will bear us up while we keep burning fossil fuels and planning to grow our economy at 4% per year forever. Hence the rush to embrace euthanasia, too, which I suspect will solve Australia's aged care crisis in a decade or two, because no one will want the nursing home anymore. All three temptations that Jesus faced—of difficulty, vulnerability, and too much complexity—would be solved by euthanasia, and indeed Satan is surreptitiously offering him what amounts to euthanasia in the third temptation.

Friends, this is the labyrinthine game we're playing, "Desert Challenge 2", and we know how it typically ends. Either we flee the difficult, or we give in to our status anxiety, or we shut our eyes to complications and uncertainty opting instead for the simplicity of being manipulated and duped, until we go blithely over the edge. Or we do all three.

Instead, we can join the game with Jesus alongside us. We know how high the stakes are, and how difficult the odds. But Jesus leads us through the game, as we come to share his desire, his appreciation of God's goodness, his trust, and his acute sense that we mustn't take the falsely labelled escape routes. And so, we can play the game right to the end, keeping our eyes on Jesus. Hence the Sunday Eucharist, hence learning to pray and be mindful, hence practicing in Lent to recognise the tempting offer to flee difficulty, vulnerability and complexity, and instead to welcome all these opportunities as gifts from God, albeit not always welcome ones. Otherwise, in one way or another, it's game over for us—personally, geopolitically, globally, environmentally.

The Lord be with you ...