

Most of us will recognise the quotation from the character, Lord Darlington, in Oscar Wilde's famous play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, who declared: "I can resist anything but temptation."

The forty days of Lent have become increasingly associated with personal attempts to challenge this statement – to resist the temptations presented by things we have attempted to give up.

At the wonderful online Pancake Party organised by Martina for twenty families on Tuesday of this week, we remembered that in former times, and still today in the Eastern Orthodox churches, people would give up almost everything in Lent except for bread and vegetables. We thought about how this would feel, and we talked about what we would find it hardest to give up. Unsurprisingly, chocolate featured high on the list, though some families were indeed planning to give up meat for Lent this year, and we wondered how hard that would feel. I personally find giving up chocolate is indeed quite a test of my restraint, but is self-restraint really the principal reason for Lenten abstinence?

The Bible, and especially the story of Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness, provides some helpful insight into what the more serious temptations which face us really are, how our Lenten discipline (whatever form this takes) could relate to them, and how we might model our responses to testing on those of Christ himself.

We might first remember the very familiar Old Testament story of Eve's temptation by the serpent. The story of Adam and Eve's fall is there to demonstrate the stark human contrast to the reactions of Christ himself to his temptations in the wilderness. Adam and Eve succumbed, not just to the delicious but forbidden fruit on offer, but to the cunning serpent's explanation of what consuming this fruit might mean – the knowledge of good and evil which would bring them a power equivalent to that of God himself. It was a test of their obedience, but it was also a prototype for the kind of temptation or sin which besets the whole of the human race – a desire for power and control over others.

We may feel that although we see many examples of autocratic and power-hungry behaviour in the world around us at present, we do not easily discern such tendencies in ourselves. However, medieval theologians believed that all the sins of humankind stemmed from the sin of pride, of believing that in some way we were better than others, or that we had got things right, or that we were for some reason entitled to things, even if this resulted in the deprivation of others, whom we may never see.

The temptations with which the Devil taunts Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness are similarly all based around issues of power and pride.

The first of these, the suggestion that he should turn stones into bread, might seem quite a straightforward idea – after all, wandering alone in the isolation and heat of the wilderness,

the idea of creating some bread for oneself might quite appeal! Yet there is a more significant test implied by Satan's words. "If thou be the Son of God ..." Each of his first two suggestions begins with these words, daring Jesus to do something dramatic to prove that he really is God's son as he claims, and to test God's love simply to defend his own pride.

I wonder if it is fair to say that almost all of us can find ourselves getting wound up by people who cast doubt on things we say or on beliefs which matter to us? We may react to this in different ways, angrily, passive-aggressively or silently, but it is very hard to do what Jesus does, and simply to remember that what matters is what God thinks, and that we are not called to prove our own significance or rightness to others.

The devil, increasingly frustrated with his failure, then tries to bribe Jesus to worship him, appealing to that subtle desire for power which we have thought about by offering him power over all the kingdoms of the world. But Christ is able to remind him that we are told only to worship God, with the implication too, that while there may be benefits in selling our soul to the Devil here on earth, for those who serve God there is the promise of eternal glory.

Lent, then, is a time as much of testing as of tempting.

Even in secular society, people have often embraced these weeks as an opportunity for minimalism, for de-toxing and de-cluttering, concepts which have become hugely popular in an age of excessive choice and plenty. But such activities only become uniquely Christian if they involve some searching questions about ourselves and our own beliefs.

Christians can use Lent to examine the depth of their faith, and to face up to the challenges of pride and the desire for power, in which resisting the physical temptations of bread or forbidden fruit – or even of chocolate! – play only a minor role.

The desert, or wilderness, has often been experienced by travellers as a place of truth or reorientation that strips the human spirit bare of pretence and illusion. As we try, even in small ways, to recreate this sense of stripping back during Lent, we can discern its real purpose in laying aside our own pride and our yearning to prove our virtue or success to others, and in finding extra time and space for prayer, reflection or Bible study to listen for God's voice as he reveals himself to us.

Perhaps one useful aspect in the idea of giving material things up for Lent is that it provides opportunities to talk about faith with others, to demonstrate that Christian practice is not limited to Sunday worship, but affects the way we live.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness reminds us to keep the words of Scripture and the teachings of our faith in our minds, on our hearts and on our lips, as Jesus did, revealing that in every test, small or great, which faces us, there is the opportunity to glorify God, and to witness to his importance in our lives.