

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY INVOCAVIT

(Cape Town - 1 March 2009)

Text: Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

As you know the Passion Season started this last week, on what is known as Ash Wednesday. And the very first text in this Season of Christ's suffering and death is one about temptation.

As we had the wedding of Lisa Hohls and Jason van Dijk yesterday in Jakkalsfontein, I am reminded of a young man who was hugely tempted while he worked away from his girl friend on one of the Pacific Islands. The only reason why he accepted the job, he tolled his girlfriend (and himself), was to earn money for their wedding one day.

As the weeks went by the girl got a bit nervous as her boy friend worked on an island known for its many attractive girls. She wrote to him about it, but he declared that he was paying no attention to them whatsoever. But weeks later in one of his letters he did admit that at times he was tempted. But he promised her that he was fighting the temptation come high or low water and that he would remain totally faithful to her.

Shortly after writing this letter he received a parcel from his girlfriend. In the parcel was a note and a small harmonica. The note read: "I am sending you this harmonica to take you mind of those island girls". Dutifully he wrote back and told her he was practising the harmonica *every night* and while he was playing thinking only of her.

Eventually the young man flew home. As he landed he rushed to embrace his girlfriend. But she said: "Wait a minute. Before you embrace him, let me first see you play that harmonica".

As you can imagine: He was in trouble. It is not easy to play a harmonica. You don't learn it on the plane home.

Likewise we are tempted all the time. As we reflect on it, we are most probably alarmed that we give in so easily to temptation. In most cases we hate ourselves because we know, that is not who we are, that is not how we brought up. But lurking under the surface is anger, jealousy, envy, worry, pride and bitterness. And there are desires of all sorts that Satan latches onto and uses against us.

Most of the time, of course, we fight the temptations. And we may even believe that if we were only more sincere or committed in our faith, these temptations wouldn't happen in the first place.

But we are wrong. Look at Jesus. Jesus had just been baptised. At his baptism God had declared: ***"This is my own dear son, in whom I am well pleased."*** And "walla" The next thing we see is Jesus being tempted - three times.

The point is this: Temptation forms part of our life no matter how close we are to God. And this story just shows how clever the devil really is. His temptations are invariably totally logical and they sound good. He tempts us in doing what seems to be the *most natural* thing to do. Inevitably we don't even realize the harm until it is too late.

Take the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve wasn't tempted with something that is obviously sinister or evil. She saw some fruit, which looked very inviting. And surely eating some fruit can not be bad, can it?

And besides the devil had some convincing arguments why she should satisfy her hunger. If eating meant that she would be able to distinguish between good evil, that can only be good.

That is Satan. You don't recognise what he is up to, until it is too late and sin destroys your life. He sidles up to someone whose marriage is foundering and says: "Surely you deserve more than what you getting. If your spouse isn't prepared to be there for you, look somewhere else". Or he says: "Surely your hatred is justified. The other person deserves what he or she is getting." But remember Satan is a deceiver. He is never interested in your happiness.

Jesus' temptations in the desert are no exception. The temptations are as logical and as natural as can be. Jesus had been without food for 40 days. "Why don't you turn those stones into bread?" the devil says. Who would be hurt by that? And why should God's Son starve, if he could have food by a simple command?

Then Jesus is taken to the roof of the temple. Satan tempts him to throw himself down onto the courtyard below. Fact is, his ministry would have been much easier if he dramatically landed without hurting himself. The crowds would have been at his feet.

And then the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world. "It is all yours", he says, "if you bow down and worship me." Just imagine, what Jesus could have done if all the riches of this world belonged to him. He could put hospitals for the sick. He could fund

research to fight cancer. He could feed the starving. He could stop the raging wars in this world.

There is a good logic behind every temptation. And temptations always appeal to our *natural instinct*. In fact temptations are seldom a choice between good and evil, but easy and hard. And Satan will always go for the easy.

Think about your own temptations: It is easier to hate, than to forgive or to say "sorry". It is easier to lie, than bear the consequences of the wrong. It is easier to rest, than to consciously and regularly seek the presence of God.

For Jesus it was far easier to jump from the temple top than to walk the way of the cross. And that is all Satan was interested in. He wanted to prevent Jesus from giving his life on the cross. Through miracles Jesus could have excited the people. But not change them. Through his power he could have subdued the masses, but not save them.

Satan knew, victory over sin could only be wrought at the cross. When Jesus stepped out of the Jordan river, he started his journey to the cross. God had decided long ago on the path of forgiveness. He send his Son, so that there would be forgiveness for you and for me.

But why do we so often mess it up? Why do we often flounder when faced with choices? Why do we get caught in choosing the easy way, instead of God's way?

The answer is quite simple. We make the wrong choices because we don't know our Bible well enough? As you know we are bombarded by the media every day. We page through endless magazine, or watch TV for hours. And it shapes us, whether we resist it or not. On a subconscious level it determines our values, our morals. And if God's Word is not clearly known, the path chosen will always be that of the world. The easy way.

See how Jesus responds to the devil. Each time he comes with a temptation, he counters it with the *Word of God*. When the devil says, make the stones into bread Jesus says: ***"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*** When the devil says, jump from the temple top, Jesus counters: ***"It is (also) written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*** And when the devil says, I will give you everything if you bow down and worship me, Jesus declares: ***"It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."***

Sometimes you know in your heart what is right, but it seems so difficult, so hard to do. But we need to remember, God is a loving God. He always seeks to guide us along the path of righteousness. His ways, although hard sometimes, lead to lasting peace and enduring joy. And indeed it is difficult at times. But no diamond is shaped without pressure. Likewise we grow and are shaped and molded by God not in good times, but

in those difficult and challenging times of our life - if we trust him.

Jesus is the perfect example. He chose the cross. The devil tempted him with glory and power. But he walked the other way. And as a result people may say: God is all powerless. But the great German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, wrote:

God is nowhere greater than in his humiliation.

God is nowhere more glorious than in his self-surrender.

God is nowhere more powerful than in his helplessness (on the cross)

So often we seek worldly glory and find nothing but restlessness. God leads us along the path of restlessness, but what we find is eternal glory. Amen.