



The Sin of Social Injustice

**A reflection for World Day of Social Justice
and the first Sunday of Lent**

26 February 2023

Readings *Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7, Psalm 32, Matthew 4: 1-11*

Each of the readings today relate in one way or another to sin and temptation. They speak of our alienation from God, the ways of God, and of the decisions we would make which would lead us to such alienation. On an individual basis we have a sense of what this means: symbolically seen in an Adam or Eve overstepping their relationship with God by deliberately eating the forbidden fruit. From childhood we are aware of what sin is when we lie or steal or hit out in violence. But what does sin mean and who was being tempted when a country like Australia locked up children in detention on Nauru, or currently locks up juveniles at an adult prison in Western Australia? Who is sinning in a wealthy country like Australia where too many are homeless and families do not have enough food to feed their children? What leads to the sin of great tracts of jarrah forest still being cleared for bauxite mining with its animals being pushed to extinction, even when we collectively know this is what we are doing?

Today we want to move beyond our individual choices and what they may mean for us personally in our relationship with God, to how those choices can act out on a community wide basis. What are the sins we are collectively hooked into which lead to our alienation from God, one another and the planet? And what does it mean to turn from that 'social' sin and find redemption and new life?

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is tempted three times by Satan. And while this is primarily a text which speaks to Jesus' own temptation or obedience to be the chosen One of God, it also speaks to us in our individual temptations, and to us as a society.

The first temptation is, that hungry and in the wilderness, Jesus should turn stones into bread. The temptation here is that we can solve all our problems through stunts, miracles and quick fix solutions. Just throw money at the problem! On an individual basis, 'just make a donation' and then go on with your life, because now 'you've done your bit'. On a social and political level it is for governments to aim for some election winning quick solution that may get someone back into office, but which fails to address the root causes of an issue.

Jesus did not give in to the option of an easy, quick solution, but instead chose the way of long-term obedience to God. Such a strategy can be alien to our contemporary, fast paced world. Yet the way of God and the way of real social change is usually through engagement and relationship. It is through working and often persevering over time.



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The second temptation of Christ was to throw himself from the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. "Wouldn't this prove Jesus had real faith in God? And besides, everyone in the holy city would see and know how wonderful you are!"

Jesus does not give into such a childish cop-out. Not only would it have been a failure to take responsibility for himself - hardly a mature stance of faith - but it would be to seek his goals through fame and publicity alone.

In our age of social media, reality TV and the 24 hour news cycle this is a very pertinent social sin. When we come to treat life as little more than a superficial popularity contest with little substance, then image is all that matters and 'fake news' abounds. But the Way of Christ is in caring, justice and inclusion over time. It is seen in the looking back at the real good that has been done and the change which has been accomplished. And we are reminded that true discipleship is not so much in the spectacular or showy media events we may from time to time be involved with, but much more in the day to day acts of care and respect we give.

The third temptation in Matthew is a blatant seeking of power and control, even if that should mean 'selling your soul to the Devil'. "Bow down and worship me", says Satan, "and I will give you everything".

In our current world with the rise of autocratic governments, this social sin is very apparent. In nations like China, Russia, Belarus, Myanmar, Syria, parts of Africa and elsewhere a variety of dictators hold sway. Some governments readily resort to violence and oppression over their own people to hold onto power. And this is apart from those media-moguls or billionaires who would seek to wield social influence with little regard to truth, equity or compassion.

Yet financial and military might does not win out in the end. Clive Palmer spending hundreds of millions of dollars in political campaigns comes away with barely a single senate seat, because most people saw through the sham and chose truth over fear-mongering. The Putins of this world will never win the war in Ukraine, no matter how many missiles they can launch, because he will never win the hearts of the Ukrainian people. They are people who seek peace, community and freedom, things which follow the Way of Christ. This is something the Vladimir Putins, al-Assads in Syria, or even the Donald Trumps of this world will never understand.



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Whether as an individual or as a society, Christ shows us the way of obedience to God is the way of true victory.

An overarching theme of Christ resisting these temptations of Satan is that he refuses to give into his own self-interest alone. He does not give into greed, the lust for power or seeking after personal glory. In taking such a stance he can then be present for others without needing to use, abuse or control them.

This points to arguably our greatest social temptation and our most prevalent social sin. When we only seek to appease our own personal greeds, wants and lusts with no significant thought of the other, then by its nature we take from those other people around us. We take from the earth when we want abundant cheap energy, but give no thought to the fracking and coal mining that was needed to make that possible. We take from the people in our own community when we get caught up in a whirlwind of building up our own personal investments and property portfolios with little concern for what this does to the price of rentals and the levels of homelessness. We take from the children in Third World sweatshops making our cheap clothing when our purchases have no concern for the real costs involved in our hedonistic Western lifestyles. Whether deliberately or out of ignorance, it is our self-obsessed concern that most leads to our communal sin.

The Way of Christ was never meant for our personal salvation alone, but he prayed that God's Kingdom would come for all. And he was one who lived this out: seeking the good of those around him rather than simply his personal needs and wants alone. As we follow the Way of Christ and turn our backs on temptation, it is not for our own selves alone that we do this, but mindful of others and compassionate of the earth we will also turn from injustice, inequality and the destruction of the world in which we live.

Amen.

Rev Gordon Scantlebury
Chairperson; Social Justice Commission
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A Litany for Lent

**A prayer for World Day of Social Justice
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Let us pray:

Most merciful God, we confess to you, and to one another, that we have sinned by our own fault in thought, word and deed; by what we have done, and by what we have failed to do.

We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

For this we are sorry.

Have mercy on us, Lord.

We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: our pride, our hypocrisy, and our failure to be completely honest with ourselves or with other people.

We confess to you, Lord.

Our preoccupation with our comforts or possessions, with little concern for the wider community.

We confess to you, Lord.

Our exploitation of other people and the earth's resources, paying no heed to the costs involved.

We confess to you, Lord.

Our silence at injustice in the community, and our failure to speak out when government policy is destructive of people or the environment.

We confess to you, Lord.

Our lack of care for others in real need; the poor, the refugee, the hungry – when we know we have the capacity to make a difference for at least one other.

We confess to you, Lord.

Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty;

Accept our repentance, Lord.

For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts towards our neighbours, and for prejudice and contempt towards those who differ from us;

Accept our repentance, Lord.

For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us;

Accept our repentance, Lord.

(Silence)



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(cont.)

Restore us, good Lord;

Grant us forgiveness and time for amendment of life.

Strengthen us to overcome temptation and turn once more to you and the Way of Christ.

And empower us with the gifts of your Spirit.

We pray, following the way of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Assurance of Pardon:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. -- John 3:17

God seeks relationship with one and with all.

Know that by the life and death of Christ you are forgiven and freed to walk a new path.

Thanks be to God.

***Adapted Rev Gordon Scantlebury
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