

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
BRUTON PARISH CHURCH

Shakespeare's great contemporary, the English playwright Christopher Marlowe, wrote a play about temptation. T.S. Eliot called Marlowe, " the most thoughtful, the most blasphemous (and therefore probably the most Christian) of all his contemporaries."

Marlowe's play is called Dr Faustus: it is regularly produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford and elsewhere. You may know a nineteenth-century French opera with this same theme, Gounod's "Faust", and Thomas Mann's great novel. The story of Dr Faustus is one of the great European myths.

The central idea is that Dr Faustus wants more. And more. But he doesn't want to pay for it; he doesn't think he should pay for it. He wants to be like a god: he does not want to be restricted by the limitations of our human lives. To become a god, or god-like, he is willing to sell his soul to the devil, Mephistopheles. But really, he immodestly thinks he is already pretty god-like.

Marlowe shows the learned Dr Faustus committing the primal sin of men and angels, that of 'aspiring pride or insolence' for which God threw Lucifer from the face of heaven. There is another great European myth which treats the theme of pride: that of Daedalus and Icarus. Doctor Faustus too, "swollen with cunning and self-conceit, His waxen wings did mount above his reach, And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow."

These myths tell perennial truths about us all. And they take us to the high place where Christ is tempted by Satan in our Gospel reading so we can look within ourselves and repent.

Tempted. Not threatened. Did you notice? Christ is tempted, and there are some problems about that.

Whatever you think of Angels and Demons, and not the novel by Dan Brown, when it comes to Satan, Hollywood has taught us to fear a fire-breathing monster with horns and forked tail who will grab us against our will and drag us off to infernal torments. Demon possession is stock in trade for horror movies and has been for decades. Hollywood knows what sells, what moviegoers bring emotionally to the cinema, what they want. Fear.

Our political masters know this too and tempt us, as does Satan, with terrors and anguishes. First we are threatened and frightened, then we are promised deliverance and some of us are more than tempted to believe them.

Marlowe's devil, Mephistopheles is not a melodramatic special effects ghouel, all fangs and roaring. He is distinctly cool. He wears a Brooks Brothers suit, a Charvet silk shirt and Hermes tie. He has a winning smile with perfect teeth. He is a very well-informed academic theologian. He knows about God, even if he doesn't know God. Temptation always matches exactly the weakness of the intended victim. But in order for temptation to work, the victim must be willing to be tempted, willing and too weak to resist. Faustus is; we are.

Why, before Mephistopheles ever makes his appearance, Faustus has already been wallowing in pride. What's worse, Faustus, the fool, thinks he has conjured up Mephistopheles to do his bidding. He thinks there is a bargain to be made, a bargain which the devil will actually keep. Faustus thinks he can negotiate his entry into hell and hang on to some portion of his integrity, but the devil is wiser than that.

Back to the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Temptation? The old question, "What can you give a man

who has everything?" comes to mind. Faustus wants gold and girls and amazing holidays at expensive tropical resorts. He started off believing he already knew all that there was to be known about everything, including God. He was easy to deceive.

And Christ? What can the devil offer that might tempt Christ? Not wealth, not sex, but the power to do good. Or did you really think Jesus was just being offered political power for its own sake? Don't you think that the real temptation is based on this: who could do the most good for the people of the world, for their needs; who could do better than Jesus? The temptation is a subtle and evil appeal to love and compassion.

The people need an incorruptible ruler, someone who would be just and fair. The temptation is that Jesus knows this and knows – so do we – that such are not to be found. The people are hungry, they are starving. The technology to turn stones into bread has not yet been developed by MIT or CalTech. And even if it were, surely an expert in intellectual property law would wrap up the rights to its development. But Jesus could freely turn stones into bread for the hungry without ever having to count on fickle human charity. He could do real good. No-one could do better. He could save us from the temptations of trusting in duplicitous politicians or human selfishness. That would be no salvation at all, just a deceit.

And if he threw himself down and angels wrapped him in soft cotton wool and set him gently on the ground, wouldn't that assure the peoples' faith? No more doubtful dogmas, no inquisitions, separation and schisms. A sure foundation for religion. We've seen it with our own eyes. No need to walk in faith: we would have knowledge. It would be on YouTube.

You see the temptations of Christ, are, none of them, based on mere power. They are based on a real temptation. Christ

is being tempted by the devil to do something the devil does not have it in his power to give. The devil is tempting Christ to accept cost-free divinity. To love the world and its people without bearing his cross.

At the end of Lent we will remember again Christ's crucifixion: the terrible truth that the good Christ procured for us all was bought at terrible cost.

At the very moment of his damnation, Faust who, unlike us, cannot accept Christ's grace, cries out: "My God! My God! Look not so fierce on me!" – an echo of the cry of desolation from the cross, "And at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

The temptation of Christ was to avoid that moment and find an easier way to our salvation. Thank Christ he would not do so.