

Isn't technology a wonderful thing? In the lifetimes of pretty much everybody here it has changed our lived experiences beyond reckoning. If, 100 year ago, say, your in-laws had wanted to communicate with you, well unless they were very rich and could afford to send a cable- (and they wouldn't have been because most of us would have been downstairs with the scullery maid rather than upstairs with Lord Grantham) then their communication would have had to have been a letter, which, before airmail would take at least a month from posting to reading. So by the time you opened that missive telling you they're coming to stay they'd already be on the ship and it'd be too late to cancel their visit. Scroll forward 100 years, and it's all changed. Now your in-laws can communicate with you instantly via the little metal box you carry in your pocket. With that they can talk to you -or if you're really foolish Face Time you- across countless time zones and thousands of miles to say they're just getting on the plane and will arrive in less than 24 hours. And you know what, despite 100 years of technological process it's still just too late to cancel the trip.

That metal box of technological tricks will also allow you to send your friends amusing pictures of kittens, enter into vicious slanging matches with complete strangers, and simultaneously permit other complete strangers to steal your identity and empty your bank account. Technology's a wonderful thing: if only humans were too. Time marches on and despite our becoming increasingly blasé about the latest big thing- a self-driving car? Zzz. An internet enabled fridge? Yawn. Despite innovation fatigue, technology still has the capacity, sometimes to surprise us.

I was myself surprised recently when, I discovered that there is now a piece of software that can scan a student's assignment and then generate a plagiarism score: the higher the score the more they have nabbed from someone else. Amazing eh? I found this out pretty much incidentally, when talking to someone who is doing a degree in Care Home Management. This is a discipline so niche it is probably quite quick to check for copying by hand: there must be fewer Care Home text books in total than there are commentaries published on the book of Habakuk each month. But still. It gets you thinking. It goes me thinking that it's a good thing the books of the Bible haven't been fed through a plagiarism detector. How embarrassing to have it pointed out that chunks of Genesis has been cribbed from the Epic of Gilgamesh or that St John cut and pasted half of the book of Daniel into Revelation.

On less hallowed turf, sermons are often little more than concatenated strings of filching if they're not downloaded wholesale from the internet. This is why I was always reticent to post mine online. That and the chilling thought that eventually even

bishops would learn how to log on. It is I know taking things way beyond the bounds of believability to think that a prince of the church would use their newfound technical knowledge not to pontificate but to look up what I've been saying. They'd have to know I existed for a start. Shhh. Don't let anyone know.

Anyway, all this is simply softening you up in a page-filling way for the admission that the next part of this sermon would get a very high plagiarism score indeed, possibly 100%, as it will be a direct quote. I make no apologies, because it seems to me that if you're going to plagiarise, you may as well plagiarise the best, so when I finally get to the point it will be one that Oscar Wilde got to first.

Now sometimes Oscar's aphorisms are witty but empty, fizzing fireworks of pun fun, and acid drops of superior sarcasm but in among the clever-clever, the droll and the waspish, there are moments that can open to us whole previously unimagined vistas of profundity if, we step back from the constant cascade of witticisms and pause to mull the message.

So, finally, here's the line, from *A Woman of No Importance*:

"The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."

On Wednesday gone we started the season of Lent. On the first Sunday of the season we're still in the first leg of the long slog of this time of preparation and penitence, the season that from time immemorial Christians have spent contemplating the sinners we are and the saints we would be. I think that throwaway line from a late Victorian play can help us in the weeks ahead.

If you've decided to give something up for Lent- a commendable practice (though obviously not if you're giving up coming to church): if you've decided you're going to go without till the Easter binge-fest then it's probably about now, five days in that you're starting to feel the effects of your self-denial. If not, you might want to wonder if you're doing it right or not. Lent: no pain, no gain. So, all going to plan, right about now you'll be getting little niggling cravings nibbling away at the edges of your resolution, right about now you'll be no longer able to happily ignore those siren voices urging you to succumb, right now that temptation is joining the organist and pulling out all the stops.

This is why every first Sunday of Lent Christians revisit the gospel story of Jesus' temptation by the devil. Premier league stuff tempting too. Sort of puts your chocolate craving into context.

So there we go. We visit again Satan's attempted seduction of Jesus into sin. World power. Godlike status. Instant wealth. Jesus was tempted. Yes he was. It sounds easy in the gospel: all he had to do was quote a bit of Scripture and the yearning went away. Sounds easy. I bet it wasn't. If it wasn't hard, what's there to teach us? If it wasn't hard, Jesus wasn't really tempted. So Jesus was tempted big time- but resisted.

We too are tempted, big time and small time: but we succumb. We give in, capitulate, yield and then binge. Over and over again. From the beginning to the end, from our mother's arms to our death bed, the best we can honestly hope for is that we might at some point have managed to do a bit better than the rest of the time, knowing that along the way our walk of life was almost certainly characterised more by tripping and stumbling than head held high striding boldly forward.

It might be that choosing to start Lent dwelling on Jesus's resisting temptation is designed to motivate us: 'look, it can be done'. That's a risky stratagem, because equally the effect might be to discourage us. We'll never be that strong, we'll never be that good. And it's true. We won't. Ever.

But it is important to remember that, as far as God is concerned, all the bad stuff we have done, the stuff we'd be mortified to see sprayed across social media, the secrets we could never tell, all those things that can make us feel we'll never get it right, those things that across the decades can still make us disappointed in ourselves and hot with shame: all those things are, as far as God is concerned, in the past. Gone.

In the past, it was much more common for Christians to go regularly to a priest to make their confession. That's what pancake day was for. Don't worry, you don't have to. Often the first time they'd do this was when they were about 10 or 11, preparing to be confirmed. That's eleven childhood years to get off your chest, which for most kids is very little really to fess up. The process then became about making something up that the priest would believe. Those who made their first confession as adults, however, would usually not have to use their imaginations: they'd have real, far weightier things to unburden. Stands to reason. For child and adult alike making a confession is always a hard thing to do. But you know what? The most difficult thing about it is not telling another human being that you've cheated on your wife or stolen the bridge club money or voted Conservative. The most difficult thing about confession is believing it when you are told that your sins have been put away.

Absolved. Forgiven. Gone. That's a hard thing to believe. God has forgiven you: now forgive yourself. Not so easy.

*Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future*

Here, then, is a message of Jesus' teaching you cannot ignore. God will not worry about what you have done and what you have been. That is gone. Your past may still have consequences for others in the present and that you should change if you can, you may even need to face justice. But you cannot change one second of your past. You can only affect your future: how you will be, what you will do. When you repent, you don't say 'sorry', you turn from the past to the future.

When we meet Jesus there is no difference between the saint and the sinner. We all have a past and we all have a future. When we meet Jesus, where we have come from does not matter. What matters is the direction we will now take. Keep moving. Pick yourself up when you fall. Keep going. Turn to your future.

*Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future*