Mark 1:12-13

For the next few minutes I’d like to concentrate my thoughts on Verses 12 & 13 of this mornings gospel.

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan: and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on Him”.

It seems that no sooner was the glory of the hour of the Jesus’ baptism over than there came his battle against temptations.

I think there is one thing which stands out here in such a way that we shouldn’t ignore it. Paul mentioned it on Wednesday evening at our Ash Wednesday service. It was the spirit who thrust Jesus out into the wilderness for this time of testing. The very same spirit who came upon him at his baptism now drove him out for his test.

In this life it is impossible for any of us to escape temptation in some form; but one thing I think is sure--temptations are not sent to us to make us fall; they are sent to strengthen us, our minds and hearts and souls. They are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are meant to be tests from which we emerge better and stronger to serve God.

Suppose someone enjoys playing football or rugby or some other game; suppose they are doing really well in the second team and showing real signs of promise, what will the team coach do? The coach certainly will not send them to play for the third team in which they could probably walk through the game and never break sweat; more likely they will send them to play for the first team where they will probably be tested as never before and have the chance to prove themselves. That is what temptation is meant to do--to enable us to test ourselves and to emerge the stronger for it.

One, if you like slightly technical point, as with many things we find in the bible forty days is a phrase which should probably not be taken completely literally. It is the Hebrew phrase used to express a considerable length of time such as when Moses was said to be on the mountain with God for forty days ( Exodus 24 ).

It was Satan, who we sometimes call the devil, who tempted Jesus. I have to admit to sometimes struggling with the idea of the devil.

So perhaps it would help to look at the development of the concept of Satan, which I think is very interesting.

The word Satan in Hebrew simply means an adversary; and in the Old Testament it is used of ordinary human adversaries and opponents.

The Philistines fear that David may turn out to be their satan in

1 Samuel 29; David regards Abishai as his satan in 2 Samuel 19; Solomon declares that God has given him such peace and prosperity that he has no satan left to oppose him in 1 Kings 5.

So the word Satan began by meaning an adversary, a human one and not one specific individual or entity.

But as time goes on it does take a step on a downward and somewhat more sinister path; it begins to mean someone who pleads a case against a person. It is in this sense that it is used in the first chapter of Job. In that chapter Satan has the particular task to consider men and to search for some case that could be made against them in the presence of God. He was the accuser of men before God. The word is also used this way in Job 2 and in Zechariah 3 . The task of Satan was to find and to say everything that could be said against a man.

As I mentioned earlier the other title often used of Satan is the Devil; the word devil comes from the Greek diabolos, which literally means a slanderer. It is a small step from the thought of one who searches for everything that can be said against a person, to the thought of one who deliberately and maliciously slanders people in the presence of God.

So far in the Old Testament Satan is still human individual and not yet the malignant, supreme enemy of God. He is more the adversary of man.

But now the word takes the last step on its downward course. Through their time of captivity the Jews learned something of Persian thought.

Persian thought is based on the conception that in this universe there are two powers, a power of the light and a power of the dark, Ormuzd and Ahriman; the whole universe is a battle-ground between them and man must choose which side he is on in that cosmic conflict.

To put a more Jewish/Persian slant on it, we could could take the view that in this world there is God and Gods Adversary, Satan/The Devil.

So it was almost inevitable that Satan/The Devil, should come to be regarded as The Adversary par excellence. That is really what his name has come to mean; that is what he always was to man; but now Satan becomes the essence of everything that is against God too.

When we turn to the New Testament we find that it is the Devil or Satan who seduces Judas in Luke 22; it is the devil whom we must fight in 1 Peter 5 & James 4; it is the devil whose power is being broken by the work of Christ in Luke 10. Satan, The Devil, is now the power which is against God.

Here we have the whole essence of the Temptation story. Jesus had to decide how he was to do his work. He was conscious of a tremendous task and he was also conscious of tremendous powers.

God was saying to him, "Take my love to men; love them till you die for them." Satan was saying to Jesus, "Use your power to blast men; obliterate your enemies; win the world by strength and power and bloodshed."

God said to Jesus, "Set up a reign of love." Satan said to Jesus, "Set up a dictatorship of force." Jesus had to choose between the way of God and the way of Satan.

And that is, of course the message for us all, in life we have a choice, to be a follower of God or to be an adversary of God, and all that follows on from that decision.

In our story presented to us by Mark the choice seems straightforward, temptation is clear to see and, of course, Jesus is strong enough to reject it.

For us it often seems to be so much more difficult and complicated, and as mere human beings we also may feel less well equipped to cope with it.

But note the last few words of that passage, “and the angels waited on him” or as it is in another translation, “the angels took care of him”.

I would like to leave with you the suggestion that we also have to remember, that just like Jesus in the desert, whatever temptations and trials we have to face, we don’t have to cope with them alone either.