

Luke 4: 1-13 – Temptation

Prayer

It was Oscar Wilde who remarked that the *only way to get rid of temptation was to give in to it*. I am not commending that, because those of us who have given in to temptation know that is not the way to get rid of it but to open the door to further temptation. And Jesus is a rather better guide than Oscar Wilde.

There is of course absolutely nothing wrong with being tempted. It is an inevitable part of being human. One of the great affirmations of the New Testament is that our Lord Jesus Christ himself was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. I am not sure we always hear that properly.

In the Gospels the story of Jesus' temptations follows on directly from his baptism – this was when God spoke from heaven – *You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*. Jesus' baptism was his commissioning to be the Messiah, the Christ. But how was he to go about this? In our reading from Luke chapter 4 the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert for forty days – giving us the 40 days of Lent. These 40 days remind us of the 40 years that the ancient people of Israel had in the desert when they came out of Egypt before they could enter the promised land. It was the time for them to learn what it meant to be God's people, and these lessons were summed up in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy – our first reading was from there. When Jesus quotes Scripture three times in our passage, each passage is from Deuteronomy, the book from the desert.

I don't know if you have given up any food or drink for Lent? I know if I'm hungry I can get a bit grumpy, and if I'm very hungry, well... Jesus was fasting and he was hungry and the tempter came and said, *if you are the Son of God command this stone to become a loaf of bread*. Should we imagine a figure sidling up to Jesus or an insistent voice in his head? I don't know. But either way the temptation was real enough – if you're the Son of God feed yourself. You're alone. No-one will ever know. Test yourself with these powers; try it out; why go hungry? *It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone.'* No, says Jesus, I cannot turn stone into bread, because that would be to doubt God and test him. I have come into the desert to meditate on the word of God and not to test run any miraculous powers.

Then the devil took him to a high vantage point where he could see the kingdoms of the world. This is imagination not geography of course. But there was nothing imaginary about the temptation – *if you worship me, all this will be yours*. Was it really his to give? Power, political power and all its trappings – was Jesus to go this way? Was he to be the political Messiah who would deliver his people from the power that was Rome? *Worship the Lord your God and serve him only*. Jesus was not to go down a political route. He would walk in perfect obedience to his Father and that would be the path to the cross not the imperial palace.

Thirdly the devil took Jesus to the Temple, again in his imagination rather than physically, and they went to the top of a wing overlooking the Temple court, and the devil who can quote Scripture as well as any theologian and better than some, said, *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...* There was a popular belief around at the time that when the Messiah came he would do something spectacular and wonderful, and what could be more spectacular than a leap from 50 metres up to land unharmed on the ground? After all, the devil reminded Jesus, God had promised physical protection to his Son. *It is also written, 'do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*

Sometimes reading through the Gospels we might get the impression that Jesus got through these temptations here and then he was free for the rest of his ministry – as if in the desert he conquered temptation once and for all. But surely that wasn't the case. In fact some interpreters of the New Testament see the temptations not as single events in the desert but as an imaginative narrative summing up the temptations that Jesus faced throughout his ministry. I don't think we have to go so far to see the real truth that these temptations were ever present with Jesus.

Remember when Jesus fed the five thousand, what was the reaction of the crowd? They came to make him king. When Jesus shared with his disciples that the Messiah had to suffer many things, how did Peter react? Let this not be. So Jesus responded to his best friend, *Get behind me, Satan*. Every day Jesus had to live with his disciples and others waiting for him to establish the political kingdom – even after the resurrection we read in Acts 1, this is what they wanted. So were the temptations over by the end of our passage? Surely not. The devil was constantly offering Jesus ways of seizing power over Israel and the nations –

- By asserting that he was the Messiah by providing bread or the physical necessities of life for the masses;
- By asserting that he was the Messiah through spectacular miracles to win the applauding crowds;
- By asserting that he was the Messiah by doing the popular thing – taking political control from the Roman authorities and establishing Israel once more.

So – was Jesus right to have refused? One of my favourite pieces of fiction is a chapter in the book *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Fyodor* incidentally is the Russian form of Tudor – just saying. The chapter is *The Grand Inquisitor* and in it one character imagines that Jesus returns to 15th century Spain at the time of the Grand Inquisition. Jesus is arrested and brought face to face with the Grand Inquisitor, the Cardinal who is in charge of heretic hunting and burning, a wizened old man. As they meet in the dark prison cell the Grand Inquisitor tells Jesus he is wrong. *You were wrong to refuse to give the people miracle and mystery and you were wrong to refuse to exercise political power over them*. The people want these things because they are weak and rebellious. *You ask too much of them to follow you on the path of obedience that leads to a cross*. But we, he said, have corrected your work. We in the church now give people the mystery and the miracle and the authority you refused we now hold over them. We have put it right.

Now that is a very inadequate summary of a very profound and thought-provoking chapter, but the question it raises is a very clear one for us. Was Jesus right to refuse the tempter absolutely? Was there no room for compromise for him? Compromise? Very infrequently are we tempted to do what is absolutely evil and obviously wrong. If we ever see such things on our screens, we are rightly horrified. For the most part our temptations are more in the area of compromise. Jesus refused to exalt the material over the spiritual – he would not turn stones into bread. Jesus refused to exalt entertainment and the spectacular over the steady and daily trust in God. Jesus refused to exalt the path of political power and worldly influence over the way of service among the humble and poor. Compromise of our obedience to the Lord; compromise over our commitment to Jesus; these are temptations we face. Did you notice that the temptations Jesus faced were all to do with his vocation to be the Messiah, the Christ? The most dangerous and insidious temptations which face us are not aimed at 'our little weaknesses' – no, they are more about our strengths.

So how do we overcome? Some of us might be tempted, is that the right word? To think that Jesus had an unfair advantage. After all he was Son of God, whereas I'm just an ordinary bloke. But Scripture tells us he was tempted as we are. The fact that he was Son of God did not make him into a

superman who could swat away temptation like an irritating fly. No, for Jesus the temptations were real and we must say that it was possible that Jesus could have sinned. He did not, but he could have.

Our passage gives us two clues as to how Jesus overcame temptation. The first thing was that he was led by the Spirit. He was led by the Spirit into the desert and through the temptations. It was the Spirit of God that enabled him to overcome temptation. And secondly Jesus overcame temptation through the power of the word of God, the Scripture. Not that this was mindless – far from it. Jesus and the devil did not play text tennis – throwing texts at each other. Jesus truly understood Scripture because he had dwelt on Scripture. I suggested earlier that in the desert he had meditated on the book of Deuteronomy. He was able to counter the false interpretations of the devil because he knew the Word of God.

And my last point is simply this – the weapons available to Jesus to fight temptation are available to us. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to his people. He will give us power to overcome temptation. Secondly we have the word of God available to us in the Scriptures, but like Jesus we have to work hard to interpret and understand Scripture, to understand the pattern and meaning of the text and discern there the voice of God. It's a good first step to recognise the voice of the Lord as distinct from the voice of the tempter.

As we will say in the Lord's prayer...

Lead us not into temptation.

Amen