

Into Temptation

Readings: Matthew 4:1-13

For generations Christians have prayed "lead us not into temptation". It is interesting that, as that particular phrase has been changed, we now live in a society that is into temptation, really into temptation.

It is all around us and rather than being resisted it is celebrated: "Ohh, that looks tempting". Temptation is used to sell just about everything from chocolate to cars, computers, careers and back to chocolate again. It is nice to be naughty.

It seems that we can resist anything but temptation.

But what about us in the Church, how are we with temptation. For some of us we will be "into temptation" struggling with it and needing help. But I suspect that for many of us we may not have thought about temptation for a while, but I wonder whether this is because we have risen above it, or because we are so far in we don't recognise it.

Well today, as we look at the well known passage of Jesus in the wilderness, we are going into temptation and I pray that it may bring comfort but also a challenge.



The Lenten fast began to take hold.

TEMPTATION THEN

The Tempted

The Spirit which had just descended on Jesus as a dove at his baptism and is present as God declares from heaven "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" now leads him into the wilderness.

As soon as this word, *wilderness*, is used we are likely to be thinking of the place where Israel spent a lot of time. Being told that Jesus was there for 40 days only strengthens this link as Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years, and Moses their great leader fasted 40 days prior to receiving the Law (Exodus 24:18).

Jesus then in Matthew's presentation is taking on this role of Israel described as God's first born son in Exodus 4:2. And just as Israel was tested and tempted in the wilderness (Deut 8:2) so it will be for Jesus. If Jesus is to fulfil the destiny of the people of God, to take up his role as the Son of God, he needs to pass this test, he is to be the tempted one.

The Tempter

Before we consider the nature of the temptations we need to notice that quite specifically there is a tempter, and called specifically that in v3. The Devil, the Tempter, or Satan is referenced 6 times in this passage. What happens to Jesus is not simply psychological it is spiritual, a personal attack from a personal enemy of the people of God.

The passage does not give us much to think further about the Devil, he only has a voice here after all, and whilst I do not wish to give our enemy more air time than he deserves, we should recognise his reality.

C.S. Lewis reminded us in *The Screwtape Letters* that our enemy is just as pleased when we think about him too much or not at all. This passage will not let us take the latter course.

Given the fact that so much temptation is so personal to us it makes sense to me that it comes from a personal source.

The Temptations

First: Stone to Bread

Not surprisingly after 40 days Jesus is famished. Whilst this may seem like a completely unnecessary statement given the fact that it should be obvious, it does remind us of Jesus humanity, he was not simply a spiritual being.

Also it is a further connection with Israel in the wilderness where they so often failed because of their empty stomachs so it is no surprise that this is the first point of attack.

Now the temptation here is not so much doubt, that is prove to yourself that you really are God's Son with a demonstration of power, but a temptation to be self serving. "Since you are God's Son why not use the power for your own benefit."

The issue is not whether Jesus could do it, from latter stories of feeding the 5000 and 4000 there is little doubt that he could. But these were for the benefit of others not himself. The issue was would he trust his Father or would he be self serving.

Jesus counters with a verse from Deuteronomy 8 that comes straight after Moses has been talking about God's provision of manna in the wilderness.

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

In so doing he remains faithful to his calling as God's people.

Second: Spectacular Religion

If the first temptation was in an area of weakness, an empty stomach, the second is an area of strength, Jesus' faith in God's word. The Devil is quite capable of quoting Scripture when it suits him, but not being a good Anglican is quite willing to expound it in such a way as to be repugnant to another part of Scripture (See Article 20 of the 39 Articles).

Jesus is taken to a high point of the temple and is requested to throw himself off trusting in God's promises to look after him. The location is important for there would have been plenty of places in the wilderness to have thrown himself down from but if Jesus was to do this in the Temple it would have been a spectacular demonstration and vindication of his claim to be the Messiah. Yet Jesus knows that his demonstration of his role as the Christ in Jerusalem will be very different from this, not in spectacular display but in humility and suffering and death. Lifted up not in the temple but on the cross, not to be cast down and caught by angels, but brought down and placed in a tomb, and he will not deviate from this vocation or put his God to the test again quoting Deuteronomy (6:16).

Third: Selling out

The final temptation seems overly audacious, to bold by far for the Devil to propose but after all Israel had fallen for it in the wilderness, worshipping the Golden Calf having just promised to make no idols. They were given and took the easy way out.

Jesus is given an easy way to get the authority that will rightfully be his. Whether the Devil had the power to deliver on the promise is rather a moot point. The issue is will Jesus remain faithful to his calling to be the one who in dedication to God will go through crucifixion, death and resurrection as his path to receiving all authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:16). Jesus will not sell out but rather he will worship the Lord his God and serve him only. (Deut 6:13) and with this the Devil is vanquished.

Overall

Considered together we can see that these temptations are not random efforts to get Jesus to do something naughty. Rather they are attempts to deter or distract him from his vocation as the Messiah or Christ who is also the Suffering Servant who

through his self giving in service of God will be a source of salvation for all the world. The temptation to leave that path will continue throughout Gospel all the way to the cross: "Surely not Lord", "Get behind me Satan", "If you are the Son of God come down". But he stays the course and fulfils his destiny.

We can also see that in being faithful to that vision he has to put God in his rightful place. All of Jesus responses to Satan are God focused. All sorts of activities look different when God is properly and rightly taken into consideration.

But Jesus not only put God first but also relied on his word. A life time of reading the Scriptures meant that he could repel the attacks of his enemy, rightly is the word of God called the Sword of the Spirit, it both defends and ultimately defeats the Devil's schemes.

We can also see as the passage ends that Jesus lives out what he would later teach, that as he sought first God's kingdom all that he needed was given to him.

TEMPTATION NOW

There is I believe much to comfort us but also to challenge us here

When we are tempted

Jesus was tempted.

Firstly it is good to know that Jesus was tempted, presumably that is why Jesus told his disciples what he had experience.

It is possible to be so worried about temptation that it is good to be reminded that it is part of being human, there is nothing sinful in being tempted.

As Luther put "You can't stop birds flying around you head, but you can stop them making nests in your hair"

Jesus knows

Jesus being tempted means that as we wrestle with our temptations we can go to him in prayer knowing that he understands the pressures that we are under. The book of Hebrews puts it like this.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

The great cry of the teenager to the parent is "You just don't understand", we cannot say this to Jesus, he does - hes been through it.

Jesus experience helps us.

Jesus experience helps us in knowing what to do. Firstly we should follow him in putting God first and relying on his word.

We should also be warned that the Devil will not only attack through our weakness, although he surely will, he will also attack through our strengths. For just as with Jesus his aim is not so much to make us naughty as non effective, not as much sinful but not useful to God.

You see just like Jesus we have been claimed by God as his dearly loved children. Listen to 1John 3:1 *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* (NIV)

And as the beloved Children of God we have a task, what Jesus would call being Salt and Light. Paul put it this way in Colossians 3:12-14

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Verses like these should be a ready part of our armoury, well worth committing to memory. For our enemy will do all he can, whether it be through the stomach, the spectacular or the sell out to stop us living as the Children of God, to stop us living out

our vocation. This is a much bigger issue than doing naughty things. In fact keeping us focused on that may be the means that he stops us from seeking to be salt and light in the world.

Are we being tempted

But this perhaps leaves us with a challenging question. Are we being tempted? Do we feel the pull to be unfaithful to our calling as God's people? Think about this carefully. For if we are not is it because we are simply being swept along with the tide and not seeking to swim against it? The devil has no need to distract those who have distracted themselves, the sleeping do not need to be woken up.

Let us then get swimming, rouse ourselves, get dressed in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience and take up our vocation as God's beloved children, as salt and light in the world.

We need not doubt that as we follow Jesus we will be led into temptation, the tempter does not want us to live as God's daughters and sons. But this passage leaves us in no doubt that we are dealing with a defeated devil when we are with a conquering Christ.