

First Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

The temptation of Jesus comes directly after his baptism, and God's voice from heaven affirming Jesus in the words "This is my Son the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" Matthew 3.17.

Then Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, in preparation for his God given Mission. In these temptations we see the 'negative image' and polar opposite of the values of Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God. The wilderness is the place where the children of Israel had wandered for 40 years in order to learn how to trust God's mercy.

- Remember a time when you received a compliment? How did that feel?
 - Why do the temptations follow the affirmation after Jesus' baptism?
 - Wonder about Jesus response to the temptations and what it tells us about Jesus? And about God?
 - When you put yourself in Jesus' shoes, what feelings are evoked for you?
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Text

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms

of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Comment

What does it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God? This question is at the heart of this passage. And the secret is that at the very core of his being, Jesus is struggling the what it means to be the ‘Beloved of God’, as was affirmed at his baptism.

Conflict is closely associated with and influenced by our inner security and how secure our sense of identity is. Conflict with others is often an assertion of our power over the opponent, a grasping for significance, a need to ‘make a difference’, find fulfillment, realise an achievement. All that may be good in its context, but if it comes out of a personal need, an insecurity or anxiety, it is more than likely to include aspects that are potentially damaging to ourselves and others. The temptations of Christ had the potential to damage his mission, beyond repair.

Jesus’ responses from scripture.

Ben Okri has written ‘Stories, are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.’. As a Jew, Jesus was brought up to live by the story of the Hebrew scriptures. So Jesus’ response from scripture is not his participation is some clever academic debate, but a response to a questioning of Jesus’ core identity.

The First Temptation (4:3) The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

The ‘if’ here can mean ‘since’, since you are the Son of God.

It’s a natural impulse to respond to hunger by finding food. So why not? Jesus is asked to perform a miracle (making the stones turn into bread) to satisfy his hunger.

Jesus’ Response (4:4) But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

To turn the many stones around him to bread, Jesus refuses to be dominated by the feelings and needs of the ‘now’. The ‘now’ is not the only reality.

Jesus recognizes that the suggestion for this miracle does not reflect God’s character and resists the temptation to make bread from stones. In the life and actions of Jesus, the character of God is revealed.

The Second Temptation (4:5–4:6) Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

What lies ahead for Jesus is unknown. God has promised that through angels, heavenly power will assist him. So why not be assured that God’s angels would indeed protect him from all harm.

Jesus’ Response (4:7) Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

This temptation moves from being consumed by the needs of the present (hunger) to the need for a sense of security for the future. God has promised strength for what may lie ahead. Though Jesus never acted upon the power of angels to intervene (Matthew 26.53) and indeed where an angel intervened, it was to strengthen Jesus to endure the passion, not avoid it. (Luke 22.43–44, though not in some original manuscripts). Jesus refuses power of protection against future challenges. To have have such power, is in itself to ‘distrust’ God.

The Third Temptation (4:8–9) Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

All the kingdoms! All their splendour! All given! All glory! Here is the easy road to success, achievement, fame and glory. A self-gratifying prospect, instantly achievable.

Jesus’ response 4:10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

The price, to deny the truth that God alone is God, and worthy of worship. Gods word is trustworthy and true and guides us to life. His service is perfect freedom. So here at last the root of all the temptations is revealed, to displace God’s will with self-centred concern.

The choices in response to these temptations were not for the 40 days in the wilderness, but for the duration of Jesus’ ministry. Obedience to God’s Mission led Jesus not to prioritise personal comfort (nowhere to lay his head), or to seek personal power, (my kingdom is not of this world), or personal ambition (not my will, but thine be done). Jesus service of others, expressing his service of God is remarkable. And he asks his followers to go and do likewise.

How do we see these attitudes lived out in the life and ministry of Jesus?

What does it mean to be the body of Christ in our world, our life, our desert temptation?

What does it mean for God to say to us “you are my beloved”?

- How does that change our attitude, about ourselves, others and the world?
- How does that change our aspirations, our hopes, our future?
- How does that change our actions, our behaviour, our relationships?

Draw what it means be ‘beloved’ what it feels like, what shapes can hint at it?

or what other words come to mind when you hear ‘beloved’?

From the first temptation, what is the characteristic of how God uses power as revealed in the ministry of Jesus? How different is that to how we see power being used, and sometimes how we wish to use power?

From the second temptation. Following Jesus does not promise a bed of roses. Is the abiding presence of God enough for us, no matter what may happen? What does trusting God mean for me/you?

From the third temptation. God’s pattern for the ministry of Jesus and for our lives, Loving God with all our heart mind soul and strength, and loving our neighbour as ourselves, is the pattern for our lives.

Prayer

Jesus, beloved of God

You lived your life for others

Caring for the outcast, the downtrodden, the disabled

May we follow your desert footsteps

Celebrating the vulnerability of our humanity

Yet held in the beloved gaze of God.

Through Jesus, the way, the truth and the life

AMEN.

