

First Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

Where is conflict in the text for today? Where isn't it? The Temptation of Jesus narrative is an almost absurd addition at the start of Luke's Gospel: a starving-for-40-days Jesus, being tempted by the Devil and managing to resist the allure of three temptations. As we reflect on the text we also take into account what happened before and after the reading for today.

It's always been curious to me that today's text in Luke and the same story in the Gospel of Matthew, are preceded by the story of Jesus' baptism and God uttering these words from heaven, "This is my beloved Son". This is followed in both Gospels by Jesus being led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted for 40 days by the Devil, a strange juxtaposition.

Following the text for today is the story of Jesus offending his hometown by subtracting vengeance from a favourite text. His words in a synagogue emphasised the favour of God, favour that he claimed had always stretched beyond the boundaries of his own cultural religious tribe.

The temptations led to Jesus walking through the towns and villages of Roman-occupied Palestine with a disposition of inclusion and unrelenting welcome. This would lead him to conflict in many quarters, but he engaged in conflict assured of his belovedness, and determined to see his message escape parochial confines of sectarian identity markers.

So as you read the text, you're encouraged to reflect on the inner conflicts within Jesus. What did he want, what were his limits, what was his vocation? Jesus must have experienced profound tiredness, thirst, and hunger under the hot glare of the desert sun. Biblical characters in the Hebrew text had faced unforgiving deserts before him: Elijah, Moses, David. Each had succumbed to despair, to fear, to doubt. Jesus too may have experienced these. They are not sins, but these emotions do uncover the reality of what lurks within us.

Text

Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.’”

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,

to protect you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Comment

Recently the UK and Ireland were hit by three powerful storms within a week. This pummelling left a mark as they hit landfall with a particular ferocity. Each of these storms had a name: Dudley, Eunice and Franklin. I’m fairly sure no one believes in the existence of a god in the sky called Dudley. There is equally no dispute that Storm Dudley was real. There is no such thing as Dudley...but Storm Dudley is real.

Sometimes I wonder if readers of the gospels spend too much time imagining the personification of the Devil as a horned character with a tail, or, inversely, too much time denying the existence of evil. Like the demon figure in a Scooby Doo fantasy, we are either overwhelmed with delusions of an evil villain, or we pretend we live in a utopian fantasy world, devoid of evil.

The point is: evil is so obviously real in the world. From the selfish mistakes we make daily to the aggressions of superpowers around the globe, evil flourishes at every level of humanity. The challenge in reading this passage is not to look outside to find the great tempter, but to look inside and connect with the desires that often align with the types of temptations Jesus faced. Temptation to possess, to devour, to thrill and to impress is crouching at our doors, not in the form of a red devil, but as the thoughts of desire and rivalry that routinely pass through our minds.

This passage is followed by one of the cornerstone moments of the gospels. It’s important to mention it because it connects the temptations to what Jesus did next. Jesus has emerged from his great desert trial with good news on his lips. News of the expansiveness of the New Kingdom being inaugurated. The words he chooses to quote are pastoral and prophetic. He is unequivocally stating it will be for all people, and will not depend on power over others, or control. The desert encounter clarified his vision.

The temptation narrative leads into Jesus’ ministry beginning in Luke 4. Jesus stands up in a synagogue and reads from one of the most well known passages for first century Jews, Isaiah 61. What is notable is that he ends his reading halfway through a well known phrase, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.” He reads the first half about this being a year of “the Lord’s favour”, but he explicitly leaves the famous “vengeance” line out. He rolls up the scroll or, in the words of Brian Zahnd, “he closed the book on vengeance”.

Jesus then goes outside of the synagogue and provokes a crowd of people who were

fiercely proud of their religious identity. He makes the point that God had always blessed both Jews and non-Jews, even in the times of their greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha. In fact, in spite of all the lepers in the land, God sent his prophet to a general in the army of the most bitter rivals of the Israelites, the Syrian, Namaan. This proclamation nearly got Jesus killed as the crowd attempted to throw him off a cliff. This angry mob preferred a sectarian God over one who shows universal acceptance. The them-and-us narrative lived on strong in a land occupied by a foreign power.

Why is this significant? Perhaps it is important because when Jesus was tempted to gain all the kingdoms of the world, he said no. He envisioned a world where all were included, where there wouldn't be the competition of us and them, rulers and subjects. The temptation itself was a slap in the face to the mission of God, to reconcile all to himself. He didn't want to be a ruler. In the Kingdom of foot washers there were to be no rulers.

Mother Teresa said that "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." In Zulu the word and idea behind this is 'ubuntu'. It roughly translates "I am because you are". In other words, we need each other, we're dependent on each other. This was at the heart of what Jesus and his followers were about. So a temptation to rule kingdoms, to impress people with a flying off the Temple trick or conjuring bread from a stone was just never going to be an option for Jesus. The temptations were about separating Jesus as a ruler, as a flying temple jumper, from others. Jesus' life highlights our mutual belonging and how conflict can be transformed by inclusion instead of 'power over'.

For Jesus we are meant to love beyond just living. The temptations would have enabled him to live, but none of them would have led to a greater loving. None would have led to a greater connection between people. These were temptations of hierarchy and power, of pragmatism and exhibitionism. Where was the love? In the 40 days of temptations, Jesus faced conflict in the form of his inner demons, so he could walk boldly into the conflict he would face in the outer world as he announced inclusion, humility and enemy-love.

Henri Nouwen details extensively his journey from being an acclaimed author based in Harvard to moving into a L'Arche community of those with learning disabilities. The community members could not read his books, they didn't really care about his accomplishments. "I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again."

Maybe Jesus' life started again as he returned from the desert of temptation. Conflict (inner) awaited him in the desert and conflict (outer) awaited him as he left. Facing down the allure of fame and grandeur, he embraced goodness and a universal love for all-insiders and outsiders. Walking this more hidden and humble way led to conflict with those who wanted him to be a sectarian Messiah and vengeance-enactor. Jesus chose the path less travelled, as it were, the path of offending people because of whom he included rather than being lauded for whom he excluded. The desert led him to conflict, not away from it.

Response

Where are you feeling deep hunger? What are you trying to satisfy that hunger with?

After a pandemic, we hunger for companionship. We are disorientated and perhaps less certain about the efficacy of our vocation. This angst inside might project itself as criticism and rivalry. Are you feeling connection or separation from the human community around you?

Jesus went into the desert with the words "this is my beloved" echoing in his ears. Maybe this sustained him. As you face trials in your life and real inner conflicts: challenges of ambition and rivalry, of loss and disappointment, what helps you rest in a deeper identity- at peace with itself - of being beloved?

Jesus was tempted by the offer of an exchange - give me something and I'll give you something. When we see and feel the places where we are starving, what is our temptation to look for temporal sustenance?

Authenticity and inclusion will lead us to conflict at times. Take a time to rest under the gaze of One who says you are beloved and you are included.

Prayer

God of the hungry.

Of the lost and starving.

Help us to know where true nourishment lives.

It's in your heart and the hearts of each other.

Find us in our deserts and lead us into a life of love in the hearts of each other.

Amen

Further Reading

Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God, by Brian Zahnd. 2017 WaterBrook

In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership, by Henri Nouwen. 1989 Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd