

Matthew 4:1-11 – The Temptation of Jesus

This is the reading that is set for the first Sunday of Lent. Our passage describes Jesus being tested in the wilderness for 40 days. In Lent, we observe 40 days (actually it's 46 days, but we don't count the Sundays!) as a way of thinking about this story – in a sense it captures the whole of Lent. But what's going on?

It's worth remembering that this comes immediately after the baptism of Jesus, which is the first thing that Jesus does as an adult in Matthew's gospel. It's often the case that after profoundly spiritual moments, there are challenges and problems ahead, and that is certainly true here for Jesus. Perhaps you have experienced it too.

But first, let's just pause to think about the devil.

A lot of people doubt whether there is such a thing as the devil at all. It can seem a very primitive and medieval way of thinking. And it begs all sorts of questions as to where such a being would come from.

One problem is that some forms of Christianity credit the devil with a lot more power than the Bible suggests he has. We are quite capable of thinking up terrible things to do all on our own, but the Bible affirms that there is an entity which is completely dedicated to thwarting God's purpose, albeit well-disguised sometimes.

We should certainly set aside all thoughts of a red creature with horns and a pointy tail. There is no description of any physical appearance here, and those popular depictions make it more difficult to engage seriously with the real issues in question.

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight. (CS Lewis)

But whether you believe in a specific malignant being or something more vague influencing us, I expect we have all had the experience of an inexplicable urge to do something which is wrong, or distracting, or damaging to our faith; something which impairs our relationship with God, or harms our relationships with those around us, or is even destructive to ourselves.

Temptation is a reality, whatever we think of its origin, and the fact that Jesus faced it too means he understands. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it:

⁴₁₅ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. (Heb 4:15)

So what are the temptations that Jesus faced, and how do they relate to us?

Most people talk about 3 temptations when they discuss this passage; I think it's better to think of it as having 4. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that there's one, and it then gets unpacked in 3 ways.

1) Temptation 1: If.

This is the fundamental question that faces Jesus after so much physical challenge in the wilderness. As he gets physically weaker and also more isolated from the people that love him, the questions start to go round in his head. Are you who you say you are, Jesus? Are you sure? Are you up to following the call God has for you? Are you willing to own that title? Are you willing to take the consequences?

In many ways, it's exactly the same question for us. Sometimes we can feel isolated, weak, under-nourished spiritually, and we become vulnerable. Are we who we think we are? Do we believe we are valued and cherished by God?

And if we are, are we willing to pursue the call God has for us, to follow his way, to go where he leads? Are we prepared to face the cost of that, if necessary?

2) Temptation 2: Entitlement

Turn the stones to bread. It'll be a great show. If you've seen a great illusionist, you'll know what I mean. There's a man who calls himself Dynamo, and he does some extraordinary things – objects into glass bottles. He even did a trick where he walked on a bit of the Thames. He gets great crowds, and he is quite remarkable.

If you can do tricks like that, you'll have them flocking in to see you. The show will be fantastic. It'll be all about you. You can make a fortune. Feed yourself first, and then feed off the adulation that will follow.

And if you have that kind of power, you must be entitled to it. It's what you deserve – it's what you're owed.

No, says Jesus – that's not what I'm about. He quotes the Bible at the devil – Deuteronomy 8:3 to be precise. That verse was originally in the context of Moses reminding the people of Israel to remember what God did for them in the wilderness, feeding them manna and providing for their needs.

Depend on God, and trust him, rather than misuse power for your own gratification.

3) Temptation 3: Self

Jump off and float to the ground. This time it's trickier, as the devil takes him up high in the city to the top of the Temple and challenges Jesus to jump off, and to rub it in,

he quotes Psalm 91. "As it is written" – the same phrase Jesus uses when quoting scripture.

At one level it's another temptation to misuse power – simply to show off and make a display. Everyone will love it and applaud. But we don't know that anyone is looking, apart from the devil himself, so it's not clear that would be the outcome.

I think it's more about saving yourself. Jesus isn't going to set up a scene to save himself by some remarkable act, like those old Houdini escape acts.

No – Jesus hasn't come to save himself, but to save others through the giving of himself. That's why he won't put God to this sort of test. It's a contradiction of his mission, and it's a game he won't play. There were times when Jesus seemed to miraculously escape the authorities – such as when he was at Nazareth in Luke 4 - but they weren't a public stunt, and they served the purpose of taking his mission forward. This is just for show, because he can, and because the devil is asking him to.

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, says Jesus, again quoting Deuteronomy. This time 6:16

4) Temptation 4: Power

There's a U2 song called Vertigo. It's all about someone struggling with temptations, and at one point you get this voice speaking:

"all of this, all of this can be yours, just give me what I want and no-one gets hurt."

You can have anything you want, says the devil, just sell out to me and it's yours.

Well some people who manage to acquire everything certainly behave as if they've sold out to something malignant. It's an illusion people fall for at all kinds of levels. People chase after real power – through politics, money or force. But what principle guides them? It doesn't have to be governments; it can be communities or groups of people who think they are better than others. It can even just be individuals.

The illusion is that following the way of the tempter can deliver anything you desire. But it's ultimately an illusion.

The irony of this passage is that Jesus already has everything that the tempter offers him. It isn't really the tempters to give.

"All things come from you, O Lord, and of your own do we give you" 1 Chronicles 29:14

But the devil continues as convinced of his own illusion as those who fall for his words. But Jesus isn't interested in money or coercive force.

“The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45

Real power lies in self-sacrifice, in selflessness, in abandoning the pursuit of things, or the use of force, or the desire for status. Real power is in the power of love – which is prepared to give, to let go, to serve, even to die.

Be gone, Satan – and Jesus quotes Deuteronomy one more time 6:13 “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” And the proper worship of God is to live the way of love – of him, and of neighbour.

The temptations of Jesus are ones we all face in less spectacular and less dramatic ways – temptations of doubt, entitlement, self and power.

And Jesus gives us the response – count the cost, depend on God, trust him, serve others, and above all love.