

Matthew 4:1-11

The testing of Christ

Ask any football manager “What is the most dangerous moment for your team/ When are you most likely to concede a goal?” and the answer will probably be “Just after we’ve scored a goal ourselves” Everyone is still celebrating, the crowd are on their feet and no one has noticed what the other team is doing. Sometimes in life the moment of danger, the time of testing comes just after the moment of triumph.

There was **Elijah** on Mount Carmel, taking on King Ahab, Queen Jezebel and 450 prophets of the god Baal, armed only with his faith in God. When Elijah prays for fire, soon the flames are leaping high around the altar. What a moment of triumph. Yet shortly after, when Queen Jezebel threatens revenge, Elijah is so scared that he flees across the desert to get away from her.

And sometimes **for us** it can happen that just after our resistance has been at its highest, it nosedives to its lowest. For **Jesus**, the moment of testing came just after his baptism which we heard about last week. What a moment of joy for Jesus at his baptism as he hears his Father say “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

In Mark’s shorter but very similar account we then read

“At once, the Spirit sent him out into the desert.” (Mark 1:12).

The time of testing came immediately after that moment of intimacy and victory. The tempter chooses this moment to attack; but Jesus overcomes him. And we will do well to be on our guard whenever life has brought us to the heights, because it is then that we are in greatest danger of falling to the depths.

This testing of Jesus took place in the **desert**, in a place which the OT calls The Devastation. It is an area of yellow sand, crumbling

limestone and shingle. The hills are like dust heaps; the rocks are bare and jagged. It glows and shimmers in the heat. In that desert Jesus would have been more alone than anywhere else in Palestine. This is the place where Jesus fasted for 40 days; it is also the place where Jesus is to be tested; to be more precise, it is the place where the Spirit of God leads him to be tempted by the devil.

40 days? This calls to mind the 40 years which the Israelites spent in the desert before they entered the Promised Land. Jesus' 40 days in the desert pave the way for him to bring in a new messianic age. The 40 days also remind us of the 40 days which Moses spent on Mount Sinai, where he fasted and received the 10 commandments from God. Jesus is seen by Matthew as a new Moses who brings to fulfilment the Law of God and the prophets; in fact Matthew repeatedly reminds us in his gospel that the whole of the OT points forward to Christ and finds its fulfilment in him.

Just a word about **testing and tempting**; in English the word *tempt* has come to mean *tempt to do evil*. That is the meaning which James uses in his letter when he writes: "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." (James 1:13) But the word *tempt* in Greek means to test or to prove. This can include tempting to do evil, but it often only means to test in order to prove the value or quality of something, just like a person might test gold by submersing it in acid; if the gold is pure, nothing happens; if it is not, the impurity is burned off.

Several of the Bible writers recognised this *testing* as painful, but also as God's way of bringing out the best in them. The ancient writer Job, in the midst of his dreadful suffering, said

"When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

And in the NT, Peter, writing to Christians who were having a really hard time, tells them that

“These trials have come so that your faith ... may be proved genuine.” (1Peter 1:7)

God brings tests and trials into our lives in order that we should learn patience and endurance and that our relationship with him should be stronger.

When the Spirit led Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by Satan, it was a test designed to show that Jesus really was God’s son and that he would follow the path God had laid out for him.

But that’s only from God’s point of view! It was God’s purpose. From the point of view of the Devil and his purpose, the temptation was evil, for it was an attempt to get Jesus to question God’s word, misuse God’s promises and try to win the world for himself by linking up with Satan rather than by going to the cross. How did Satan go about tempting Christ? How do you picture this in your mind’s eye? Were the temptations a struggle within the mind of Jesus or did Satan appear as an angel of light or as a human being in order to tempt Jesus? It

seems clear to me that what we are told here is a struggle which went on in the heart, soul and mind of Jesus. In the third temptation Jesus is taken to a high mountain where he can see all the kingdoms of the world. There is no such mountain. This is an inner struggle.

Interestingly, the only way that this story could have come to us is by **Jesus passing it on** to his disciples. In the desert he was alone. This is Jesus’ own spiritual autobiography and for that reason we have to approach it with a sense of awe. Here, as in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son of God is telling us what he went through. Here Jesus is laying bare his inner experiences; he is telling us that he can help others who are tempted because he himself was tempted; he draws the veil from his own struggles to help us in our struggle.

In fact, Jesus’ temptations have been interpreted in at least **3 ways**:

- Some see Jesus as the true Israelite. The people of Israel in the desert were tempted to disobey God and go their own

way. They failed not once but repeatedly. Here, Jesus succeeds where they had failed;

- Others argue that the story shows what kind of Messiah Jesus was. His most important goal in his mission was neither to be an economic miracle worker nor to be a political revolutionary;
- Still others see this passage as providing an example of how Jesus' followers should handle temptation.

Fortunately we do not have to choose between these 3 ways of looking at the story; they all have valid lessons to teach us.

So let us look at these **3 temptations** of Jesus. **The first one** is in verse 3 where Satan comes to Jesus and says:

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

This refers back to the words which the Father had spoken at Jesus' baptism:

“This is my Son, whom I love”

This is typical of the way in which Satan works. He tries to put doubts in our minds about what God has said. Away back in the Garden of Eden the serpent came to Eve and his first words were:

“Did God really say...? (Genesis 3:1)

Eve and Adam were tempted to doubt that God's way is the best way.

Just picture this a moment; the desert was littered with little pieces of limestone rock which looked exactly like little loaves. Jesus was weak and hungry, having gone without food for 40 days. And after all, Jesus knew the OT story very well; there was a whole history of God providing food for his people as they travelled through the desert after they escaped from Egypt. God had even said that he would rain bread from heaven for his people.

The temptation was very real; the temptation to doubt God; the temptation to misuse his powers selfishly and for his own use. Jesus did have the power to make bread miraculously. He used that power on at least 2 occasions to make

bread for other people as Matthew records in chapters 14 and 15 of this gospel. But to use his powers for his own personal needs at the suggestion of Satan would be a selfish demonstration. Jesus knew that to focus his powers on meeting his own material needs would be a dangerous diversion from his path of obedience to God's word

In fact, at the heart of each of the temptations lies the question: Jesus, what sort of Messiah are you? Are you going to choose the easy option? Are you going to use your gifts for your own ease? Every time when life gets difficult are you going to use the divine Get out of jail free card? You can see that if Jesus had done that, he would not have been truly and fully human; he would not have been going through life in the same way that we must.

So the question is: are you going to undergo the whole human experience? And ultimately, are you going to go to the cross?

Jesus answers Satan directly by turning to God's word:

“It is written; Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4, Deut 8:3)

What Jesus is saying here is that God will look after his physical needs for as long as it takes for Jesus to fulfil his mission. He trusts God to look after him despite the gnawing pain in his stomach. He sees that the big issue is whether he trusts God completely or not. If he doubts God, even for a moment, all is lost.

The words which Jesus uses from Deuteronomy sum up the lesson which God had tried to teach his people in the desert all those years before; the lesson that true satisfaction is a life which depends on God alone.

The **second temptation** is in verses 5 and 6: Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands,

So that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11, 12)

Jesus rejected the first temptation by quoting Scripture. So Satan gets in on the act himself. He quotes psalm 91 and in effect says to Jesus: do you believe that? I believe it. In fact, I believe it so much that I’m going to make a suggestion. Let’s go up on the highest point of the temple, and then you can jump off. God will save you and the people who see you will realise that you are the Messiah and follow you immediately. What a show! People will follow you immediately.

Unfortunately, you can use **isolated verses** of Scripture to justify almost anything. Some German theologians in the 1930s used obscure verses from the book of Genesis to back up Hitler’s ideas on the superiority of the Aryan race. And I’m sure a lot of you know the old joke about the man who read a random verse from the Bible each day to help him on his way. One day he hit on the verse “Judas went and hanged himself.” So he thought “Well,

that’s not much good, I’ll try another one. So he tried again and got the verse “Now you go and do likewise”

Jesus’ **first lesson** to us today is to trust the word of God completely. The **second lesson** is. Do not take a verse out of context but interpret Scripture with Scripture. Use other verses, or indeed use the Bible as a whole, in order to see the meaning of a difficult verse. God is the one who inspired the Scriptures which does not make them all easy to understand, but does mean that the different parts of the Bible complement each other, reinforce each other and throw light on each other.

When Jesus quotes the verse:

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test”, he is pointing out that we should not put ourselves in danger for no good reason and then expect God to keep us safe. God does ask us to take risks in order to be true to him, but not in order to make ourselves look important. Faith which depends on signs and wonders is not faith at all. And God’s rescuing power is

not something to be played with; it is something to be quietly trusted in everyday life.

Jesus refused the way of the sensational because he knew it was the way to failure and because to long for the sensational is not to trust God but to distrust him.

In the **third temptation** Satan tempted Jesus to use political power fulfil his mission. He took Jesus to a very high mountain (8) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. Satan promised to give them all to Jesus on one condition that he would bow down and worship him. Not very subtle this time!

Jesus would ultimately achieve his purpose, he would establish the kingdom of God, but he would do it by way of the cross. This would mean a lot of suffering for him and for his disciples. But in the end the whole world will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. Then victory that Satan offered was an easy victory, a painless victory, but in the end a hollow one because it would not deal with the basic

problem of human sin. Only the cross could achieve that.

What can we learn from the story of Christ's temptations?

Firstly, we face the same battle

Temptations are a fact of life. We cannot avoid many of them. We see at the end of today's reading that the Devil left Jesus, but in Luke's account there is a telling little addition: "The Devil left him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13)

Jesus faced temptation throughout his life and so do we; the temptation to stop trusting God; the temptation to leave God's way and be conformed to the ways of the world around us.

Secondly, we have the same choice

Joshua challenged the people of his generation: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve whether it is the gods your ancestors worshipped or the gods of the people around you. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15)

As we have the privilege this morning of meeting freely to worship God, in many countries there are Christians who meet knowing that their meeting is banned and that they may well be imprisoned, tortured or killed because they follow Jesus. The temptation to give up and follow the easy road must be enormous.

Incidentally, one in 10 Christians in the world is persecuted for their faith. We, the other nine, must support them by prayer and by giving – which is why our special offering on communion Sunday is for the Barnabas Fund which helps Christians who live under persecution.

Temptation comes to us in more subtle ways, but it is very real. Being a Christian is not cool, so the temptation, especially for our young people, is to give up.

But thirdly, we can have the same victory.

What is the path to victory? Our Lord points us to it when he says 3 times “It is written ... it is written ... it is written ...”

As Paul told the Ephesians, the only weapon of attack which we have is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Eph. 6:17) Remember Jesus’ example. He is the one in whom even Satan could find no fault, the one whose eyes were always on the glory of his father. And yet he, our Lord and Saviour, needed to know the Scriptures in order to win the victory over Satan. How much more do you and I need to know the Bible!

God’s words are wonderful words. They speak to every need of the human heart and mind. But for them to be useful to you, you have to make them yours. We must study them, apply them to our hearts and memorise them, because only the words of God which we know will be useful to us in living for God and overcoming temptation.