



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Lent 1: Even in the midst of temptation

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9 March 2014

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." **4** Jesus answered, "It is written: 'People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" **5** Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. **6** "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.' " **7** Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" **8** Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. **9** "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." **10** Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" **11** Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Dr Paul Brand was speaking to a medical college in India on the theme *Let your light so shine before others that they may behold your good works and glorify your Father.*

Directly in front of the preacher's lectern was an oil lamp, with its cotton wick burning from the shallow dish of oil. As he preached, the lamp ran out of oil, the wick burned dry and the smoke induced a coughing fit for the speaker.

He seized the opportunity, "Some of us are like this wick. We want to shine for the glory of God, but we stink. That's what happens when we use ourselves as the fuel of our witness rather than the Holy Spirit."

We can be tempted to burn on our own fuel rather than God's oil ... and all this has to happen in an environment of various forms of temptation.

Here in the Wesley Theatre we begin a series which looks at the Person of Jesus Christ. The series will take us through the season of Lent and segue into our Easter Mission, which will directly address the question of 'Who is this Man?'

Inevitably, we shall pass by the road of suffering and, in the face of the cross, we shall capture the full meaning of what it is to see a Man who is also Lord. However, we begin early in the ministry of Jesus—or perhaps more accurately just prior to the beginning of his calling the disciples to follow him.

Directly after Jesus' baptism, he is compelled by the Spirit of God to enter the wilderness. In a way that is not dissimilar to the Transfiguration, a time of trial follows quickly on the heels of moments of high exaltation. The high and holy experience of the Jordan was quickly followed by the wilderness testing.

One writer astutely observed that “The narrative ... presents the interpreter with an over-abundance of riches.”

- The setting of the story in the broader context
- The weight of Old Testament citations
- The dramatic conflict between Jesus and satan
- The nature of God’s Sonship
- The presence of the Spirit of God

The context is so precise, for it occurs in a barren wilderness. The temptations have a real sense of identity for those of us who must live out our Christian discipleship in the twenty-first century. Each temptation could be understood not only in its context but in its application to our lives.

- The temptation to change stones into bread is to satisfy physical hunger
- The temptation to jump safely off the temple pinnacle is to dramatise his privileged position
- The temptation to bow down to satan is to take political control of the world

Matthew builds upon the ancient story of the People of Israel which gives shape to the gospels themselves.

The temptations have all the hallmarks of the People of Israel, both theologically and geographically. The Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and brought with Moses to Sinai where God met his people—and then for forty years we see wandering, suffering, hunger and thirst. All this seems to link quite easily with the fasting in the desert. It’s not an accident that the words of Jesus in the gospel are built upon the instructional form from Deuteronomy.

It must always be pointed out that Moses never entered the Promised Land—he died before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River. Centuries later, Jesus would lead the people, as it were, to their new promised land—but would face the very temptations to which Moses referred and would overcome them by reference to the Old Testament setting.

Why does God allow temptation?—a question that is often asked. At least part of our exploration (and perhaps the answer to the question) is that he allowed it for Jesus and this is a sign of his total identity with us.

From what must have been an emotional high of his baptism, which is about just who Jesus is, we are brought face to face with the moments of spiritual conquest and, for us, growth in our Christian lives.

One writer wrote in very graphic terms, “We are not meant to live on the junk foods of spiritual highs. We are meant to live on the bread which comes from God alone, even if it is bread in the desert.”

Jesus was not tempted so that the Father could learn anything about his Son, for the Father had already given Jesus his divine approval. Jesus was tempted so that every creature might know that Jesus Christ is the Conqueror over all that would destroy human life.

Let me explore three themes and see how they might speak to us today.

Jesus Christ prevails despite temptation

There is no quick and easy escape from temptation for Jesus—and the same is true for us. Temptation for Jesus does, however, have unique aspects to it—for it was his calling as ‘Son of God’ that was tested. We also acknowledge that it was the Holy Spirit that took Jesus Christ to the place of testing.

If you want to assess a spiritual climate within a church, then introduce the modern setting of the Lord’s Prayer ... sit back and watch the reaction. I have observed this for forty years. A common complaint runs along the lines of “I don’t like the words ‘trial’ or ‘testing’ ... but in point of fact that is exactly what happens!

There is a sense in which the account of Jesus’ temptations is very straightforward and can be understood when we reflect upon our own temptations, as we see his close identity with us.

Because it is God who leads Jesus to the place of temptation, we can see it as a necessary step in preparation for his temptations. Here is another helpful distinction between his temptations and ours.

The temptations of Jesus serve as a vital function in establishing his credentials.

In the Book of Hebrews we have some of the most devotional material in the New Testament and, in a context where there is the affirmation of the Son of God sharing our humanity, we read “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Hebrews 2:18)

Just two chapters later, we read, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

It is interesting that this last context leads us into understanding how we can come into God’s presence with confidence, receive mercy and find grace in our time of need.

One New Testament writer on Matthew’s Gospel wrote, “What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin. It is not meant to make us bad; it is meant to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us; it is meant to make us emerge stronger and finer and purer from the ordeal. Temptation is not the penalty for being a person, temptation is the glory of being a person. It is the test which comes to a person whom God wishes to use. So, then, we must think of this whole incident and experience not so much as the tempting, but as the testing of Jesus.”

The hymn writer James Montgomery wrote:

Go to dark Gethsemane,
You who feel the tempter’s power.
Your Redeemer’s conflict see,
Watch with him one bitter hour.

Frederick W Faber observed, “Every moment of resistance to temptation is victory.”

I would also want to say that we must guard against any strain of triumphalism which sees the Christian faith as above life, living in an unreal world and raised above the grimy and grubby circumstances of real life.

It is only when we get this aspect right that we can truly affirm the victory of the cross, which shows Jesus descending, indeed stooping, so that we might find a life lived with victory.

Jesus prevails through trust in God the Father. We need such trust and we cannot rely on ourselves. At our up-coming Easter Breakfast we have a world boxing champion as our guest. It was perhaps the most famous of them all, Mohammed Ali, who boarded a 747 flight on his way to a championship fight. As the attendant was going through the emergency procedures, she noticed that Ali had refused to fasten his seatbelt.

With that characteristic arrogance, he snapped, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The attendant leaned down and looked him in the eye and said, "Sir, Superman don't need no plane, buckle up!"

A consistent message throughout the Bible is that we must never find ourselves fooled into trusting in our own righteousness and power.

It is scripture which liberates

In each of the exchanges with satan, Jesus quotes from the ancient scriptures. Not only is Jesus able to resist the tempter's power, but he also shows us that it is our reliance upon God and his Word which facilitates such resistance.

However, we must also note from the biblical accounts in the gospels that it is not only Jesus who quotes scripture—for satan chooses his own texts. Simply quoting scripture, having words in the mind, is not enough. These words need to be part and parcel of our lives—then they become the word of life as "the word of God dwells in us richly".

When I was a minister in Wales, I often used to have the noted New Testament scholar, Ralph P Martin, in the congregation. I have always enjoyed his reflections on Christian themes from scripture. In writing about the temptations, he highlights the fact that satan attempts to get us to bring in God's kingdom by methods so alien to him that it turns out to be the very antithesis of all that Jesus came to be and to do.

He writes, "Today we have the choice of the same easy alternatives offered to Christ two thousand years ago: 1. Win people by ministering to their bodily and social needs alone; 2. Gain a cheap success by conjuring tricks and manipulations of what is claimed as compelling evidence; and 3. Pursue the line of freedom and peace but deny it by the methods you employ. That is exactly how Jesus saw satan's insinuations and why he rejected them as denying the Lordship of God and the fulfilment of his will in his way."

A proper use of scripture seems to me to point the way we embrace the life of God to his glory and not to meet our needs alone. We must not tempt God by putting ourselves into circumstances that seek to force him to work miracles on our behalf. The one thing that God will never do is contradict his own word.

For me, when I turn the pages of the New Testament, I am always convinced that the Word of God and the Will of God are absolutely one. Dealing with temptation is an issue for all of us and it is only as we take hold of these twin truths of God's Word and God's Will that we can remain victorious in all circumstances.

So it may sound rather old fashioned to some, but I believe we need to embrace the fact that it is essential to understand scripture, if we are going to live on the positive side of temptation.

There is a 'down to earthness' about Jesus

As we have already skirted around, the temptations of Jesus follow on from the baptism. There is a sense in which they are intricately bound together. Earlier in Chapter 3 of Matthew, we see that Jesus was prepared to identify himself with the needs of all. John the Baptist tried to deter Jesus—because of the fact that Jesus came to him. Jesus insisted that John do this and his consent followed, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” (3:15)

In the temptations of Jesus, each successive claim takes him to a higher location. The text in Matthew is structured in such a way that we see this truth. This is an interesting thought in relation to Matthew, for Satan wants a clear ascent whereas God has deliberately chosen the pathway of descent.

God communicates his most meaningful messages to us not in places that are high and lifted up, but in the ‘down to earth’. It is in the very human form of Jesus, a form tempted, hungry and yet strong, that God comes.

The devil offered Jesus a shortcut to his kingdom. The way of the Kingdom is not a way of shortcuts. We see from the ministry of Jesus that it involves suffering and death before glory. He is tempted that if he would ‘bow down’ and worship Satan (v.9), all that is to be given would be given!

The full force of this text is that so often people are tempted by the thought of:

- Glory without suffering
- Worshipping the creature and not the Creator

In *The Greatest Thing in All the World*, Henry Drummond wrote:

“The life of Jesus was a calm. It was a life of marvellous composure. The storms were all about it, tumult and tempest, tempest and tumult, waves breaking over him all the time ... but the inner-life was a sea of glass. It was a life of perfect composure ... the great calm is there.”

It is hard for us to imagine what it must have been like, but we remind ourselves that the encounter has a final scene, where Jesus rejects the invitation to serve two masters with the words, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” (v.10)

If we had been opening up the Lucan narrative, we would have drawn attention to Luke’s final words, “When the devil had finished all his tempting, he left him until an opportune time.” (Luke 4:13)

I remember meeting the writer and speaker, Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralysed from the neck down in a diving accident. In her book *Secret Strength*, Joni wrote about facing temptation.

“I was in my late-20s, single, and with every prospect of remaining so. Sometimes lust or a bit of fantasising would seem inviting—and so easy to justify. After all, hadn’t I already given up more than most Christians just by being disabled? Didn’t my wheelchair entitle me to a little slack now and then?” Joni asks her readers, “When God allows you to suffer, do you have the tendency to use your very trials as an excuse for sinning? Or do you feel that since you’ve given God a little extra lately by taking such abuse, he owes you a ‘day off’?”

Temptation is part of life; victory, by holding close to Jesus, is the only way forward.