

THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS – A REFLECTION.

Texts: Mark 1: 12-13; Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4: 1-13.

The Christian church refers to the forty days before Easter as the period of Lent. The word 'Lent' is derived from an old English word which meant 'Spring' as the celebration of the Festival of Easter occurred in Spring. Through the years many Lenten practices developed, particularly fasting for forty days, which continues in some Churches today.

Jesus had been baptised by John the Baptist and had heard God's words: "You are my Son" [*Mark 1:11*]. He was also aware of expectations placed on him as the 'Messiah' – the One for whom the Israelites waited. Four significant expectations of the Messiah were:

He would be a Political figure, a king in the line of King David.

He would be a Priestly leader in the Temple.

He would be a Prophet in the line of Moses who would challenge authority and lead his people.

He would be a miracle worker who would inspire people to follow him.

Jesus takes himself away into the wilderness. A lonely and desolate place where he gives himself the space and the time to consider his calling and the nature of his ministry. The Gospel records describe the forty days he was in the wilderness as a time of testing. A Tempter (also named Satan or the Devil) attempts to entice Jesus with promises of power as dominance and authority, power within religious structures and institutions, and power as a test to Jesus' loyalty and trust in God.

The Gospel Records.

The Gospel of John does not contain a record of the temptations. The Gospel of Mark has two verses that provide a short summary of the events that took place in the wilderness. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke have a more detailed account of the temptations. The three temptations appear in a slightly different sequence in these two Gospels. Despite the difference in the order of the conversation between Jesus and the Tempter, it was his preparation for his ministry as the Son of God that was at the centre of Jesus' search for identity. The temptations placed before him by the Tempter presented a choice between different aspects of human power. Jesus' trusting relationship with God triumphed over the power of the Tempter.

The Conversation

Personal Power: *The Tempter said: "If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread." (Mt. 4: 3-4)*

Jesus answered: "It is written, 'One shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Dt. 8: 3)

Religious Power: *The Tempter took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and said: "If you are the son of God throw yourself down, for it is written 'He will*

command his angels concerning you and they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (Mt. 4: 5-7)

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Dt. 6: 16)

Political Power: *Showing Jesus the kingdoms of the world the Tempter said: “All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.” (Mt 4: 8-10)*

Jesus said to him. “Away with you Satan for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Dt. 6: 13)

Jesus uses verses from the Book of Deuteronomy found in the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the Old Testament (OT) to withstand the temptations. Deuteronomy is one of the books that records the laws and commandments that Moses passed on to the Israelites. Jesus shielded himself against temptation invoking the authority of Scripture.

Confronting Power

Personal Power: Rather than resorting to miraculous powers to satisfy his hunger, Jesus put his trust in God to meet his needs. His faith in God took precedence over the temptation to use his power to turn stones into bread.

Political Power: The Jews were expecting a Messiah for centuries. The Scriptures emphasised God’s promise to send a king to liberate Israel. The temptation to fulfil such a prophecy was offered by the Tempter. Jesus countered with the words of the Great Commandment that called on all people to worship the one true God and serve only him. Jesus was to establish the Rule of God for all people, not as power but as Love.

Religious Power: The Tempter then uses Scripture to test Jesus’ role in the Temple. Jesus is shown all the countries in the known world from a pinnacle on the Temple. The Temple was a symbol of religious power. If Jesus were to jump from the pinnacle, the Tempter declared that God would send angels to rescue him. This was both a test of Jesus’ faith in God, as well as a test of God. Would God miraculously save God’s Son? God is never held to ransom.

Power in Powerlessness: Jesus recognised the temptation to choose power and authority even at times when the outcome may have been a positive one. By confronting such temptations Jesus rejected manipulative and destructive power. In Jesus powerlessness was not weakness. He did not need the authority of power to prove his identity. The Power of God alone was a constant presence throughout his life. He depended on it all the while he was being crucified..

Today’s Temptations

We respond personally to a variety of temptations such as the uses of resources to enrich our daily lives, information that would legitimise the use of violence, or modern technology that is used to rationalise global mass movements as being inevitable. The subtle use of power can be rationalised as a just means for doing something ‘good’ for others.

For Christians today there are temptations that present choices that could be difficult. A few of such temptations are: to be successful at the cost of exploiting our duty to care for others, to make compromises when faced with right values, to use the Bible as a book of rules rather than as a book that is the story of a Living God whose Son Jesus was human and who faced his own temptations as he began his ministry.

We may not face the kind of temptations that Jesus did or rely on Scripture in the way that Jesus did. Jesus' reliance on prayer and his dependency on God was the foundation for his identity as the Son of God. **What strategies do we use today for facing and overcoming temptations?**

PAUSE. Read the record of the three temptations.

Are you sometimes tempted to bargain with God when you need answers or a resolution to a problem?

Do you feel powerless when you pray for answers and God is silent?

What would you consider to be the 'temptations' of today?

WHERE ARE YOU, GOD?

She closed her eyes and let the rhythms of the train soothe her mind as she headed home. She was hungry and tired. It was the 2nd week of her Lenten fast. She tried to shut out the voices of her parents and their ceaseless conversations and arguments, as the train arrived at her station. Her walk home took her past her Church. She decided to go in. She always found it a place of sanctuary when she was stressed. Its quietness relaxed her. She liked to believe that God was close to her, that her prayers were being heard. She thought of her parents and the tensions and arguments at home.

Her parents were well known and well respected in the community. Her father was a solicitor in a high-powered legal practice. Her mother was the CEO of a Computer Firm. They were both leaders in the local church where her father was a Council member. They gave much of their spare time as volunteers at the local community centre. They were in many ways model parents and devoted Christians.

She had lived in their shadow during her young years. The church and her Christian school had been the centre of her early years. As a leader of the young people's Bible study group in the church she had been drawn to reading commentaries and theological articles on the Internet. There were times when she felt that God was calling her to be an ordained Minister in the Church.

Some of the gloss wore off when she went into University and enrolled for a Medical degree. She tried to separate her religious beliefs from the academic world. She struggled with what she read in the Bible and the latest scientific articles that seemed to challenge these beliefs. There was a growing chasm between her University friends and her friends in the church. She found herself struggling to find connections

between faith and science, between changing ethical and social issues and the world of her parents who seemed to be immune to most of what was acceptable to society. She wondered why she kept silent when her boyfriend had questioned “Why do we need God?” to which someone else had replied: “We don’t. We have knowledge and power to make our own choices.” And always there was a voice saying “Hey! Listen up! We can use DNA and stem cells to cure cancer and even create life. What more do we need?”

She sat alone in the empty church. In the silence she prayed for her parents, her brother and herself. She rose and walked home. She heard her parents in conversation as she walked in and went into her room. There seemed to be only one topic of conversation now. Her brother. He had left home six months ago. Recently they had learnt that he was wanted by the police for drug offences. She had heard via a friend that he was living with various friends and that he didn’t need his family. She would listen to her father going on, over and over, about what he, as a lawyer, could do to get the police to drop the charges against her brother as a first time offender. There was always that angry silence. The most difficult time was when she heard conversations between her parents and friends from the church, including the times when the Pastor would call. The strong belief that God would answer their prayers was a recurring thought for her. Many times she had read verses from the Bible that spoke of God’s promises to answer the prayers of believers. “We are good Christian people” she thought, “What is wrong? Are we not listening to your answers, God?”

On a park bench a young man sat alone. He was tired. He was hungry. His last few dollars had gone to the drug dealer. There were times when he contemplated suicide. His pain drew him to the edge. He would hear himself shouting angrily “WHERE ARE YOU GOD?”. Silence was the only answer.

How do you understand God’s power when you are troubled?

How do you respond to different kinds of silence? Or if God is silent when you are in need?

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Suggested Reading:

All Quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Articles:

The Temptations of Jesus: An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew. A Series
The Temptations of Jesus – Luke: the Gospel to the Gentiles. A Series

R. Alan Culpepper: *The Gospel of Luke* . The New Interpreter's Bible.
Vol. IX

Gail O Day: *The Gospel of John* . The New Interpreter's Bible. Vol IX

M. Eugene Boring: *The Gospel of Matthew.* The New Interpreter's Bible.
Vol VII

PHEME PERKINS: *The Gospel of Mark & Ephesians* . The New Interpreter's
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Christopher M. Tuckett: *Jesus and the Gospels.* The New Interpreter's
Bible VII

G. N. Stanton: *The Gospels and Jesus.* Oxford University Press. 1989.

Russell Pregeant: *Engaging in the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary
Introduction.* Fortress Press. 1995

The New Interpreter's Bible . Abingdon Press. 1995.