

First Sunday in Lent - March 6, 2022: Luke 4:1-13

I want to begin this morning with a question, it's an easy question, I think you'll all know the answer. Here's the question: 'How would you find out how to resist temptation?' It's easy isn't it, you all know: YOU GOOGLE IT!

If you do Google that question you will get 45.6 million hits – and two or three of them should be ok. The wisdom is in knowing which two or three to choose.

For a more reliable guide, however, you could look at the passage set for our gospel reading today, which deals with the temptation of Jesus – the traditional topic for the 1st Sunday of Lent. It's a passage, I think, that can really speak to us, because we can identify with J in his struggle with the temptations that come upon him, and we can learn from how he responds to them.

I want to suggest to you today that there are 4 things we can learn from this passage about resisting temptation.

1. Recognise the times when we're vulnerable to temptation
2. Recognise that the purpose of temptation is to derail our spiritual life and our mission
3. Recognise that a knowledge of God's word can help us defeat temptation
4. Recognise that temptation, when resisted, will go away.

Firstly then, we need to recognise the times when we're vulnerable to temptation. Perhaps the first thing we should observe from this passage is that these temptations come upon Jesus when he is isolated, hungry and almost certainly very tired (I've travelled through the wilderness of Judea and, if I had to sleep out, I don't think I'd sleep too well!) We're reminded here, I think, of something we know already, which is that we are most prone to temptation when we are tired, or isolated, or hungry or starved of some other need. The learning we can take from this is to try to avoid putting ourselves in situations where we will be vulnerable, but awareness of this vulnerability is the key thing. We can take measures to avoid getting overtired or becoming isolated or having other unfulfilled needs and that's a good thing to do, but there will always be times when we find ourselves vulnerable for one reason or another. Just be aware that these are times to be on your guard against temptation.

Secondly, recognise that the purpose of temptation is to derail our spiritual life and our mission. If you ask a few people in the street what temptation is, they will probably answer in terms of 'doing something you shouldn't' or 'giving in and doing something you want to do but know you shouldn't do' or something like that, and temptation is often trivialized in various ways. As we look through

this passage, however, we see that, in the end, each of the temptations recorded here is a temptation to Jesus to avoid or to forget his calling. The test is whether he will do that.

The temptation to turn bread to stone is essentially a temptation for Jesus to provide for his own material wellbeing at the expense of his mission. Luke tells us that Jesus was 'famished' when this temptation comes to him, and he's tired, and alone. He was coming down from the spiritual high of his baptism and perhaps wondering, whether the hard road ahead was worth it. It would be so easy to give in, to give it away, to opt for comfort now rather than the suffering which inevitably comes as one takes on redemptive work; suffering which he knew would come to him in full measure. What this temptation represents then, is the choice between material comfort and the hardships of a truly redemptive way of life.

Luke records Jesus answer to the tempter: 'It is written, "One shall not live on bread alone"' I suspect Luke thought his readers would know the full quote: "One shall not live on bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

The mission Jesus had come to fulfil was not to meet his own needs, or even the material needs of the world. Rather, as the living Word of God his mission was so to reveal God's love in all its costly and sacrificial glory that people would be drawn back to God and find, in that new relationship with God, their peace and their hope.

In the second temptation the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He says, 'Look, this is how the world works, you can see it, here are all these people making something of themselves - they're following my system of 'look after number one' and look how well they're doing! Why don't you forget this foolish calling to give your life for others, and follow me - come on, get with the strength, go with the flow, don't swim against the tide - follow me, adopt my values - all this could be yours! . . . And which of us has not heard the same voice? Most of us here are old enough and wise enough to know that these are false promises (we should never rely on the devil telling the truth!) and yet we can still be caught out by them.

Again, Jesus pulls us back by drawing on his knowledge of God's word telling the tempter: 'It is written, Worship the Lord your God, him only shall you serve.' In its OT context this is a command not to engage in idolatry. Is this a restrictive, spoilsport command? No, like all of God's commands it is given for our good and for the good of others. Despite its glittery promises the world's system doesn't offer the security and peace we long for, nor does it offer any hope to a needy

world or desperate people. Peace and purpose are found as we follow the sometimes difficult but upward call of God, and no other.

Finally, for J comes the temptation to gather a following by opting for expediency – in case doing something spectacular to gain supporters the easy way. This time the temptation is supported by a quote from Psalm 91 about the protection that God will confer. Again, it's a temptation to avoid his calling by taking an easier way. But expediency – taking the easy way – will not achieve the redemption which the world needs - that redemption occurs only through sacrifice and perhaps suffering. I'm sure that, at this moment, Jesus saw before him the way of the cross contrasted with the easy way of popularity and recognition. The way of the cross involves hard work, perseverance, faithfulness, risk and, for him, a shameful death - the short term benefits, you would have to say, were not good. But it is the only way which also offered the possibility of God's forgiveness and life transforming love to men and women who desperately needed it.

Jesus calls out the misuse of the quote from Ps 91 – which properly understood is an expression of the way in which God promises to watch over us and care for us as we undertake our mission – it certainly does not suggest God's power can be exploited to support our own ambitions or avoidance techniques.

I have said that, in the end, each of the temptations recorded here is a temptation to Jesus to avoid or to forget his calling. The test is whether he will do that. But I want to suggest that these or similar tests also come to us today. Every week we affirm 'We are the body of Christ' and, in turn, we are called to be Christ to the world. The question is, 'Will we be faithful to our calling?' We need to understand temptation not in the flippant or silly ways it's often regarded by the man or woman in the street, but as an attempt by the powers of evil to derail our spiritual life and our mission.

My third point was that we should recognise that a knowledge of God's word can help us defeat temptation.

Every day we are literally bombarded with messages about how we should live, what we need, what will make us happy, and so on. In this information overload we need some sure guide to help us know what it means to be faithful to our calling to follow Jesus. It's instructive I think, that in each of the situations he faces, Jesus demonstrates a deep knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. They are his guide for living, he is able to draw on them and engage with them as he faces the subtle and dangerous temptations that come his way. The point is clear, I think, what is true for Jesus is true for us. But if we are to draw on a knowledge of God's word to help us defeat temptation we do need to give time to read it and discuss it and take it to heart.

The Psalmist declared:
Thy word is a lamp unto my path,
And a light unto my way.

Without a sound knowledge of God's word we will surely stumble.

Finally, we should recognise that temptation, when resisted, will go away, at least for the time being.

At the conclusion of the third temptation, Luke records: **13** When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

What Luke records here has been found true in Christian experience through the ages. St James writes, 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you!' If we can resist temptation when it comes upon us, after a while it will go away and we will be strengthened by our victory over it and encouraged by the fact that we have remained true to our calling.

So, to sum up:

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