

The Temptations of Jesus – *Lent 1*

Reading: Luke chapter 4, verses 1-13

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are often understood as being a test of his Mission or his Person. It's the second understanding that I want to explore here.

The essential background is the baptism experience of Jesus and behind that, the experience of Israel in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus.

At his baptism Jesus heard a Voice; "You are my beloved son" The words implied a unique relationship with God. Son of God! I believe the words came as a bombshell to Jesus. It might be said that he was always Son of God. But was he always conscious of it? The temptations' experience makes much more sense if we realise that the declaration "Son of God" came as a complete revelation to him. And now he had to wrestle with the implications. Was it true? Or was he hearing things? And Jesus is tempted to prove what must always rest on the conviction of faith – our relationship to God.

1. "If you are the Son of God, turn the stones into bread". Note the 'if'. For this is a temptation to prove once and for all the truthfulness of that baptismal voice. If he used his power as Son of God to turn stones into bread not only would his own hunger be alleviated but it would satisfy his need for certainty. If he performed a miracle then all doubt would be removed.

The same temptation had been faced by Israel in the wilderness. They too were hungry. Unwilling and unprepared to trust God they demanded Moses give them bread. Moses yielded to their faithlessness. Faced with the same temptation Jesus, the One True Israelite, rejected it. *"Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

2. "If you are the Son of God, jump off the pinnacle of the temple". (*I am following the Matthean order of the temptations here.*)

This is a variation of the first temptation. But with this difference. Since Jesus refused to use his power to produce a miracle he is now tempted to force God to work a miracle. Jump off the top of the temple! And if he survived it would only be because God had miraculously intervened to save him.

Jesus rejected this devilish suggestion. *"You shall not tempt the Lord your God"*. His words are lifted straight out of the Exodus story where the people of Israel demanded a miracle to slake their thirst. Moses gave way to them but insisted they were testing God. Jesus will have none of it. This One True Israelite refuses to test God, preferring to live by faith.

3. The Mountain Top.

This temptation harks back to the incident in the old testament wilderness story when the people of Israel made and worshipped a golden calf. This was in defiance of Moses' command that: to inherit the Promised Land there must be no compromise with local gods or their worship. Here in the wilderness they compromised. And the story of their settlement in Palestine was the story of continual compromise with Canaanite religion.

And Jesus is tempted to compromise too. Tempted to compromise with the "powers" that rule the lives of men and women for the sake of establishing the Kingdom of God. Tempted to use the Devil's weapons to defeat the Devil! Tempted to serve both God and mammon. Tempted to act on the principle that 'the end justifies the means'.

And he rejects the temptation. *"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"*. He will not be unfaithful to the God who calls for trust and obedience.

4 Relevance

I am arguing that Jesus' temptations were not only a test for him personally. They were more than that. As Son of God he was having to re-live and re-experience the temptations faced by the sons of God (as Israel was known). His temptations were in a personal and representative capacity.

That is their relevance for us today. We, who are the People of God, are called to live by faith. Our relationship with God must always be a matter of faith — and faith by its very nature precludes absolute certainty. Either we trust God or we don't. The demand for proof and certainty is a sign that we don't trust sufficiently.

Jesus was tempted to prove his relation to God by either working a miracle himself or forcing God into a miracle. And we are similarly tempted. *If only I could speak in tongues I would know I am a pukka Christian!* And we are forever putting God to the test. Christians often call it 'putting a fleece before the Lord.' To succumb to this temptation is a sign that we are not prepared to live by faith and faith alone.

And Jesus was tempted to compromise. So too are we — and so is the Church. Align ourselves with the *'powers that be'* and the success of our mission is guaranteed! — It isn't.

Man shall not live by bread alone.

You shall not test the Lord your God.

You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.

Jesus' answers to temptation are the principles by which we, as the People of God must live. And, living by those principles means that we must have to live by faith, trusting where we cannot prove. As the old hymn put it;

"Trust and obey, for there's no other way"