

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.'

⁴Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone."'

⁵The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷If you worship me, it will all be yours.'

⁸Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."'

⁹The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰For it is written:

' "He will command his angels concerning you

to guard you carefully;

¹¹they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

¹²Jesus answered, 'It is said: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

¹³When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Jesus's temptation

Jesus had just been baptised, and affirmed as the son of God in that moment of baptism. As he goes off into the wilderness to think and pray, perhaps he was wondering — what kind of Messiah will I be? What should I do? His are not normal temptations, because Jesus knows that he has been imbued with divine power.

The first temptation, to make bread, does not seem so very wicked, does it? Poor chap, he had gone into the wilderness to fast and pray, and he was hungry. When I am hungry, tired, or feeling sorry for myself in any way, I know that I am at my weakest against temptation — I am my least patient, my most self-indulgent, my least thoughtful of others. What could be wrong with a few rock cakes?

Not so obvious at first, but think about the role Jesus had to fulfil. He was God incarnate, but that incarnateness was a very important part of who he needed to be. Jesus's incarnation bridges the gulf between the eternal, sinless Father with finite, fallible flesh. We need to know that God understands our suffering, and stands with us in life's struggles. If Jesus can give in to temptation and feed himself on the quiet then he's not living as one of us. He's being superman.

As another way of illustrating this, if we speed forward a few hundred years, one of the heresies that was muddling Christianity was the contention that Jesus was not really flesh, and only seemed to have a body. Some argued that he was so holy and pure that he did not muddy himself with this awkward flesh and blood stuff — he was better than that. Thus, on the cross, if you believed this, Jesus did not suffer, but only seemed to suffer. This was a heresy and is known as docetism. It was condemned at the Council of Nicaea, and largely shrank from influence after that.

What has docetism got to do with the temptation to make bread? Well, in the Bible passage, we find that Jesus refuses to use his power to comfort himself. He will not claim the unfair advantage for himself over the rest of us. If he could make bread when he was hungry, he could use his divine power to take away the pain of the cross. Jesus would be a faker. But Jesus was not. He embraced the deal of being fully human, even to extreme hunger, extreme pain, and death. And as such, we know that when we suffer, we know he understands this suffering and sympathises with our pain.

Now, let's look at the next of these temptations, to have all authority and splendour — if he were to bow down to the devil.

The first temptation in the Bible is when Adam and Eve are tempted to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Why? Because *'then we will be like God.'* Jesus is the son of God, and fully part of the trinity. As a person, he is Jesus, distinct from the Father and from the Holy Spirit. As a being, he is God — no less God than Father or Holy Spirit.

There is perfect love between the members of the Trinity — Father loves Son with perfect love. Son loves Father with perfect love. The Spirit loves each with perfect love. Is it possible for the Son to see what the Father has and want to have it, too? In other words, can the Son be envious, or covetous, as Adam and Eve were? It is literally part of his DNA to be like this — because he is human. Humanity's success is founded

on our extraordinary ability to imitate and learn from each other. But humanity's greatest failing comes from the same strength — the ability to see others and want to be like them, in possessions or power.

This was Satan's own temptation — to see God, and seek the same honour, power and influence as God. Now, the devil tempts Jesus with the same thing — Set yourself apart — be greater, prouder, more splendid than anyone else. Stand alone! Be the equal of your Father, independent, and over all.

This is the temptation to be truly powerful.

When we talk about God we often talk about God's power. We say that God can do anything. But in a way God cannot do anything — because he self-limits to doing only what is good. Jesus has all the power, but must be self-limiting. He must not set himself up as a political Messiah, a greater King David. That might seem good, but there was better good — and the path he chose of humility and submission was the better.

Worship the Lord your God only. Don't set yourself up as a rival.

And what of the spectacle of throwing yourself from the temple?

Is it possible that Jesus, after forty days of fasting, had resisted the temptation to make bread, but was wondering why his Father had not sent angels to minister to him already? Did he go in the wilderness and somehow doubt the care of the Father? Would a leap from the parapet prove this to himself, and to others?

For many of us God can seem distant, especially at times of trouble. When we are bereaved, when we face redundancy, when we are caring for family with ill-health we want God to be close, supporting us. Yet sometimes, it seems as if God is just not there. On the cross, (which is the endpoint of the Lent journey we are beginning) Jesus cried 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It was a quote from a psalm of David — one that identified with the feelings of abandonment that we can all feel, but one that pointed towards his vindication. Here, in the wilderness, trying times can feel like abandonment, tempting us to test if God's presence is real. But this is also the place where God comes close, and speaks to us — just as he did for Moses and the wandering Israelites of the exodus.

How does this help us? How does Jesus's resistance to temptation help us in ours?

I have observed several times already that Jesus overcomes temptation with compassion. The 'wrong thing' is wrong because it diminishes care for others. Jesus's temptations were specific to him, but would have resulted in his being less human, less ready to identify with the human condition of suffering and injustice. Less the second Adam.

Left to our own devices, we are pretty good at turning inwards — caring for ourselves at the expense of others, when push comes to shove. Lent fasting asks us to care for the body a little less, so that we can care about God's word a bit more. Love ourselves a little less to love our neighbour a little more. Lent sparks us to lean into God's word and lean into our prayer life a little more so that through the rules, we can find the compassionate heart of God — which is what really enables us to do the right thing, when we are tempted.

Amen.