

The Temptation of Jesus

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 10th March 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Romans 8b:-13; Luke 4:1-13

I wonder what you make of this passage about the temptation of Jesus? I wonder whether it presents you with any problems? I for one can't help picturing the devil in this passage as a slightly comical figure with horns and red tights. How are we supposed to imagine the devil in the modern world and in our own lives? I wonder if you're aware of him at all? And when I look at the temptations themselves I find myself wondering, "Well what's so wrong with these things?" After fasting for 40 days, there's a temptation for Jesus to want food: well what's wrong with that? After 40 days, of course Jesus is hungry! Why shouldn't he eat at the end of his fast? And what's wrong with seeking authority to put the world right? Shouldn't the Son of God have authority over the kingdoms of the earth? Wouldn't the world be much more safe and peaceful if he did? And what's wrong with wanting to throw yourself into the arms of God? Isn't this the 'leap of faith' that preachers are always urging us to take? Why should that be wrong?

So can you see why I begin by asking whether you can see any problems with this passage? These temptations are not temptations to break major commandments or rules and they are not obvious choices between black and white and right and wrong. They're much more nuanced than that. They're more in the nature of 'tests' to see what kind of 'stuff' Jesus is made of at the beginning of his public ministry. And as we stand at the beginning of Lent, as we walk with Jesus into this season of preparation and reflection in the run up to Easter, I wonder what 'stuff' we shall be revealed to be made of? I wonder how we shall emerge from this season of testing? It might be worth keeping our focus on Jesus and considering for a moment how he managed to resist the devil, and I observe three things:

First of all Jesus resisted the devil because he was open to the Holy Spirit. The passage begins by telling us that after his baptism, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and then was

led by the Spirit in the wilderness. What does that mean? It suggests surely that Jesus was very close to God. He was open to God, seeking God's love and guidance moments by moment, allowing God to shape his everyday choices. And for you and me, perhaps openness to the Spirit begins by asking for the gift of the Holy Spirit; seeking to be filled with the Spirit; referring our choices and desires back to God; consciously seeking to make the life of Jesus our pattern and template. Continually asking ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" isn't actually a bad habit, if we want to be led by the Spirit of Jesus. So this Lent, let's pray that we may be open to the Spirit.

Secondly Jesus resisted the devil because of his spiritual discipline. He went out into the wilderness to fast and pray and he made those things his priorities, gaining control over his physical appetites and giving over time to God. And in the background of this passage there is also a clear discipline of meditating on scripture - Jesus has it at his fingertips: you just needed to nudge him and quotations from scripture were going to come out. And when tested by the devil, Jesus immediately quotes from the word of God. He was immersed in the scriptures and these shaped his life and ensured his choices were instinctively in line with God's Word. So for you and me, the invitation this Lent is to cultivate our spiritual disciplines, those habits that will help to keep us open to God's Spirit, responsive and obedient and faithful, so that our actions and attitudes instinctively reflect the passion of Christ himself.

So I wonder what habits you're planning to embrace this Lent to deepen your discipleship and grow closer to Christ? Perhaps we must pray that we may all cultivate habits that will help to keep us open to God's Spirit.

The third thing that Jesus did to resist the devil was to recognise the temptation for what it was. For Jesus, the challenge was not so much to keep the rules, it was rather to stay true to his calling: the testing was of Jesus's vocation. Do you notice how each temptation begins with the devil saying, "If you are the Son of God, then why didn't you do this or that or the other?" What is being tested is Jesus's sense of who he is and what he's called to be. He has just been revealed as Son of God at his baptism and now we're going to discover what that means. According to the devil there might be more than one way of being the Son of God: the Son of God might transform the world by

offering bread and circuses to everybody; or by leading an invincible army and imposing his rule; or by providing unassailable certainty so that nobody could doubt who he was or what sort of authority he wielded. But that Son of God would have been a very different sort of creature, and Jesus sees straight away that focusing on material needs and on power and on claims of certainty were not compatible with the nature of the God of love, and in that way he revealed himself to be truly God's Son.

And perhaps when we read this passage we tend to forget that we also are called to be children of God: that is our vocation in this world, to work out what it means to live as God's children. That's what it means to be human. And what Jesus reveals is not just what God is like, but also what real humanity is like. So this Lent is an opportunity for you and me to explore what it means for us to grow as human beings, as children of God.

And if Jesus is our model, we don't become more human by focusing only on material things, on bread to fill our stomachs, or the material things that will satisfy our appetites. Perhaps the most radical Lenten discipline might be to give up shopping, at least as a leisure pursuit. We don't become more human either, by seeking power and by trying to force other people to do what we want and to serve our own agendas or to make other people useful by serving our needs. We're all of us needy and we all need others to pay us attention from time to time. But we need to be wary of using others only to meet our needs. And we don't become more human by looking for a false kind of certainty. Love depends on trust and not proof. I knew a woman once who wanted proof that her husband loved her, and because she couldn't be certain (because you can't prove love in that kind of way) she concluded that he was unfaithful, even though she had absolutely no evidence of that, and he did nothing to undermine her confidence. But she couldn't tell the difference between love and proof. And sometimes we mistake faith for certainty. The reality is we live by faith not sight, and that's what makes our relationships so rich and life-giving: they're unpredictable because they depend upon trust and faith and we don't always realise that our humanity depends more on faith than on certainty. So this lent, may we pray that we can grow in trust: in God; and in others.

So Jesus resisted the devil by remaining open to the Holy Spirit, by practising disciplines of prayer, fasting and bible study, and by paying attention to his calling to be the Son of God, which was also a calling to be the second Adam and to show us our own calling to be the children of God. You may recall that this phrase 'If you are the Son of God' is one that crops up later in the Gospel of Luke, at Calvary: Jesus is nailed to the cross; passers by cry out and say, "If you are the Son of God, why didn't you come down? Why don't you save yourself?" And Jesus realises that his calling to be the Son of God, to be the faithful and obedient and trusting second Adam, requires him to stay on the cross; to take away the sins of the world in our place; to offer himself in suffering love in order that the world might be cleansed and forgiven.

But that sense of his calling didn't come from nowhere, it had been shaped all the years of his life. And we are faithful to our calling when we remember that we have spiritual needs as well as physical appetites; when we resist the impulse to control the people around us and make them serve our needs; when we remember that trust is more important than proof and keeps us open to people and to the world around us.

I still don't know what the devil looks like, but I do know there are many things that will distort our calling to be God's children. And so this Lent, may you grow in the confidence of your calling to be a child of God. May you grow in openness to the Spirit of God and in your practise of spiritual disciplines, that we may all become not only more religious, but more human and come closer to fulfilling God's purpose for each one of us.