

Jesus tempted in the desert

Luke 4.1-13

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Our life is full of the temptation to live for ourselves and to place ourselves and our immediate needs in the centre of the universe. We are so morally corrupted.

At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside because we see him as secondary to our own immediate needs. We need food, we need money, we need this and that ... and we want it now.

The idea of fasting, of being hungry, of not having now what we want, can become more important in our life than God himself.

The temptations Jesus faced in the desert represent the basic temptations that we all experience. They are related to:

- Our physical needs, like hunger for food, for things, for love;
- They focus on the human desire for power and possession;
- And they are related to our pride and our doubts about God.

1. The three temptations of Jesus

Jesus rejected the temptation of immediate gratification resolutely. He was in a desert covered by little pieces of rock. The tempter said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, do not be hungry! You have the right to food, and you can do it!"

"If you are the Son of God" – these words sound again when Jesus hangs on the cross. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross."

Jesus is challenged to proof his credibility. If you, Christ, are really the Son of God, and not just another one of the prophets, why not make it clear once and for all. And why would you suffer? You have a right to blessings, to feeling good!

The devil also showed our Lord in a vision all the kingdoms of the earth and offered him kingship over all. 'Here! You can have it!'



Kingship is exactly why God send Jesus to this world, is it not? Isn't this part of the mission of Jesus? Isn't he supposed to be the king who unifies the whole earth in one great kingdom of peace and well-being?

The temptation for Jesus is to take shortcuts to reach that goal. But he firmly rejects this temptation for a shortcut to worldly power.

And really, he would not have reached the goal, because God's goals can only be reached by God's means.

Much later, our Lord is again on a mountain, after he is raised from the dead. The risen Lord gathers his followers on a mountain where he confirms: "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18).

Two details stand out: The Lord Jesus now has power on earth and in heaven. Satan only offers power in this world.

In his beautiful book titled Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI underlines:

Without heaven, earthly power is always ambiguous and fragile. Only when power submits to [God] can it become power for good. And only when power stands under God's blessing can it be trusted. [...] Jesus has this power in virtue of his Resurrection. This means that it presupposes the Cross, his death. It presupposes that other mountain—Golgotha, where he hangs on the Cross and dies.

The route to salvation for the world is via the cross. Jesus rejects the temptation to take a shortcut; he rejects the worship of power but He puts God in the first place. God alone must be served and worshipped.

The third temptation is for Jesus to jump from the temple and test God. 'Did God not promise to always take care of you?' The devil suggests that God must submit to our pre-conditions to prove to us that He is real.

We are dealing here with the question of how we can know God – how we can be sure he is there and that he takes care of us. Jesus could have jumped. But he did not. It would have be the ultimate form of pride: we decide how God has to prove himself.

From where Jesus stood on the top of the temple he could see the place where he would be crucified. He was going to leap into the abyss indeed, but into the abyss of the cross. He jumped into darkness to display God's love for humankind.

And on the top of the temple he realised that his leap into that abyss of the cross would land him into the loving hands of His Father.

Jesus did not need to test the Father by leaping from the temple. He trusted him, and rejected the idea of testing God. In our hard moments we do not test God – we trust in Him.

2. What can we learn from the story?

Of course we can learn from this story for our own daily life. The lessons seem very clear. Jesus has shown us that we must make serving God a higher priority than meeting our own needs. ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you...’

In our personal life, in our church, in our nation, the good life can only be attained if we put all of our needs and desires under the authority of God. He comes first.

And even then, the good life is not defined by our food and our goodies, but by knowing God.

We also learn that we must not try to reach our good Christian goals by bad methods. We listen to God only for our life’s goals and for the manner in which we reach those.

This means, practically, that we will never live a life different from what our Lord commanded us. Love for God and love for our neighbour dictates how we behave in all realms of life.

And we learn from Jesus that we must not put God to the test. He does not have to prove himself to us; He is the one testing us. Our life is for him.

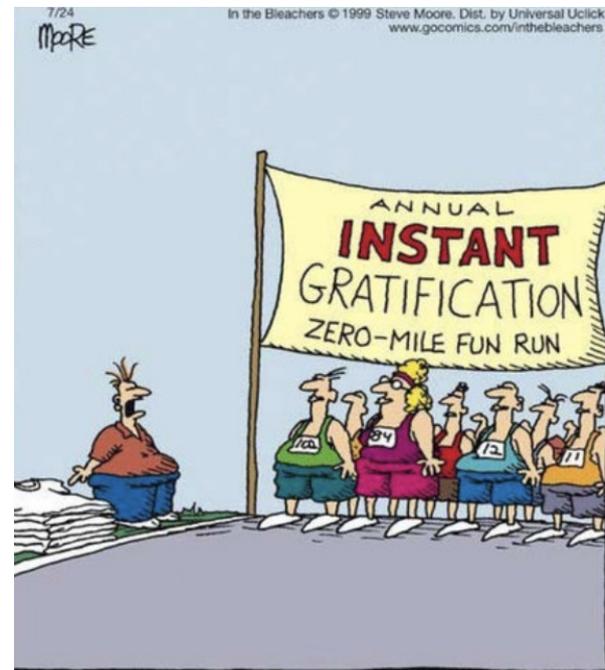
Humbly we say: Lord, I believe you are here; I believe your word; I believe in your Son Jesus Christ. Whatever happens to me, whatever cross I have to carry in my life – you are number one.

We can also learn from the story how we have to fight our temptations. Jesus always used the Word of God. But be careful: the devil seems also an expert in quoting bible verses.

The debate between Jesus and the devil is a dispute over the correct interpretation of Scripture; this dispute about interpretation is ultimately a dispute about who God is.

But if this is all we learn from this event in the life of Jesus – be good, read your bible - we are to be pitied. If it is not more than a moral lesson, we are doomed.

Because we are defeated again and again. Again and again we put ourselves and our primary felt needs in the first place, again and again God is pushed away, outside the centre of our lives. So often we treat God as a means to help us reach our own goals.



Runners to your mark. Get set. Go! ... OK, come get your T-shirts."

3. The meaning of Jesus' temptation

But there is hope; there is more to say about this story than that Jesus was perfect and we are not but we have to try.

If we read the story carefully, we see how Luke contrasts the disobedience of ancient Israel with the obedience of Jesus. Think for instance of these parallels:

* After Jesus is baptised, God leads him 40 days into the desert. Just as Israel went through the Red Sea and was in the desert for 40 years.

* And Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Israel is my firstborn son'. (Ex 4.22). Just as Jesus is called God's firstborn Son, immediately preceding these 40 days - when he is baptised.

* And the Biblical responses that Jesus uses to counter the temptations, all come from the first chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. In those chapters we read of God giving Israel miraculous food in the desert. We read of Israel getting power over many nations. In those chapters God commands Israel to obey Him and we read Israel tested God in the desert.

* "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test", Jesus replied to Satan. In this way he alludes to the passage in Exodus where the Israelites demand a miracle of Moses. Moses told them, "Why do you put the Lord to the test?" (Ex 17:2) Israel presumptuously tested God, but they failed to see that their own desert-life was really God testing them.



And here we see the great difference between Israel and Jesus. Israel did not obey God, but here we have Jesus, the great Son of Israel who finally fully obeyed God. This is how the Bible presents Jesus to us: finally someone who obeyed our Lord God perfectly well.

Many church fathers also point to the parallels between Adam in Paradise and Jesus in the desert. In Satan's question

'If you are the son of God, command this stone to become bread', we hear the echo of 'Did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden.'

Theodore of Heraclea, he died in 319AD, wrote: "The first Adam sinned by eating. Christ prevailed by self control." (Fragment 22)

Adam did take a bite - Jesus did not.

This takes the story of the temptations of Jesus in the desert away from just a moralistic story into the realm of salvation history. Jesus is the second Adam, the true Israel. God's perfect servant who is able to save Israel and all of humanity.

This is our hope; our sure foundation. Finally God had found someone who truly obeyed him perfectly well.

And this perfect life, ending in the perfect obedience on the cross, this life that was lived fully for the obedience and love for God alone, this life has opened for us the door to God, where we receive forgiveness, full salvation. If only by faith we hang on to Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

God became a man and adopted the dangers and problems of mankind, for there was no other way to lift up fallen humanity. God had to enter into the drama of human existence.

This was the core of Jesus' mission; he entered into our world, down to its uttermost depths, because only by doing this he could find us, lost sheep, to bear us on his shoulders, and to bring us home to God our Father.

By rejecting the temptations of the devil, our Lord could atone for the failures of those who lived before him and for those who came after him. For us. His perfect life was the value God was waiting for. He is the perfect high priest to intercede for us with God. He beat the devil by standing firm, and so he earned the right and the power to bring us back to God.

Benedict XVI, in his book called Jesus, writes beautifully:

The earthly kingdoms that Satan was able to put before the Lord at that time have all passed away. Their glory [...] has proven to be a mere semblance. But the glory of Christ, the humble, self-sacrificing glory of his love, has not passed away, nor will it ever do so.

Let us entrust our lives anew to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All other things will pass away.

And let us worship God alone, for having lived with us, and for accepting the road of perfect love that led him to the cross and that brought us back to God.

+ Amen