

AN ENCOUNTER WITH SATAN

Luke 4:1-11: Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, 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. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'" The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" The 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. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Have you been tempted lately? You surely have if you've seen the chocolate ads on TV. Look at this lovely choc ice – don't you see how it has a heart for you! And see how the cartoonist trivialise temptation. The chocolate biscuits are calling out to you! Do you hear them call? Or try these funny one liners. "I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it." (Mae West) "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." (Oscar Wilde) "The trouble with resisting temptation is it may never come your way again." (Korman's Law)

And yet temptation is a serious matter, perhaps the most serious one of all. Think of the divorce statistics. Even as recently as 1971, 6 out of 1000 marriages ended in divorce every year, but now it's 12. And at the root of marriage breakdown is usually – temptation. Temptation to look too closely at an alternative partner – and before you know it, there's an affair. Or, sadly, the marriage could break down because of violence. One partner is tempted to take out frustration on the other, and continuing the marriage becomes impossible. And there are worse things yet. The temptation to carry a knife and use it. The temptation of nations to enter an aggressive war, to commit genocide. Need I say more?

Temptation is not a trivial matter – it's at the root of all sin. The dictionary calls it "enticement of someone to do something against their better judgement". As Christians we have sources of better judgment which are without equal, and that's the word of God and the prompting of his Holy Spirit. And all sin is a defiance of God's good judgement. So I believe a better definition of temptation is that it is enticement to disobey God.

And what is the ultimate source of this temptation? We must return again to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve met up with the serpent, who is Satan, and he enticed them to sin. Their descendents – including us - have remained vulnerable to temptation, and it's fruit, sin, ever since. We can all have wrong thoughts – the question is, do we give in to them and act on them. Here's how James puts it "each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." We're enticed – by Satan, but then our fallen natures take over and, like Adam and Eve, we act contrary to God's will.

So who is this Satan? Like temptation, the modern world trivialises him. A comical character with horns and a tail – a Halloween costume. And yet that is not how scripture describes him. Here's perhaps a better image, from "Passion of the Christ" – chilling isn't it. Before the world was created, he was a mighty angel, perhaps God's director of worship, Lucifer, the angel of light. And then he became proud, challenged God's authority, and was driven from heaven. Out

of revenge, and perhaps jealousy, he set out to ruin God's good creation by leading Adam, the son of God, away from his father. And as we just heard, he succeeded. Because Adam gave his God-given authority to Satan, Satan is truly the prince of this world – as we just heard in Luke – the authority and splendour of earthly kingdoms “has been given” to him. C.S. Lewis says there are two errors we can make about Satan. One is the error of the modern world, to trivialise him and assert that he doesn't exist. But equally we can be obsessed with him, unnecessarily anxious about Satan and his demons. The truth is, he is no match for God. As a fallen angel, he is a creature and not a creator himself. He can only be in one place at a time, he has to send his demons out, who are outnumbered by angels 2:1. Satan and his demons can't read our thoughts. He only has the authority that God allows him, we know that from the Book of Job. But he still causes plenty of trouble!

Let's go back to the reading. Jesus, the Son of God, enters the scene. We know from the start of Luke that he has had a normal childhood, but very aware of God being his father. Now, at age 30, he has felt God's call to ministry and been baptised in the Jordan by John the Baptist. Ringing in his ears is God's wonderful endorsement “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” And the Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove as he came out of the water. This is in Luke chapter 3. But immediately preceding our text is a genealogy – Jesus is the son of Joseph, the son of Heli....but listen to how it ends “the son of Adam, the son of God”. Luke didn't put the genealogy there for fun, for some obscure Jewish tradition either. That's twice now in Chapter 3. Jesus is the son of God. And like Adam, Satan was out to get him. Can Jesus do better than Adam? No human being since Adam had. All had fallen, and had given in to temptation. Read the Old Testament – you will see. David committed murder and adultery. Noah got drunk. Jacob lied and cheated....and the Israelites, fed by God for 40 years in the desert, turned to complaining and idolatry. And now we have Jesus.

So directly after his baptism, our text tells us Jesus “was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil”. Jesus had a lot to think about. He knew now that he was the Messiah promised by the Old Testament – had he not heard the father confirm it? He was the one who had to save his people, to save mankind. But how? But how? So he fasted and prayed. Have you ever fasted? I think it's a great spiritual discipline. I believe we pray more powerfully and think more clearly when we're not carrying around a bloated stomach. But I have to say, by around 5 pm, I start to get a headache, and so far I have not fasted more than 24 hours. But Jesus fasted 40 days! The same length of time that Moses was with God, fasting, on the mountain of Sinai, as Exodus 34 tells us. But Jesus had another companion - Satan.

Jesus, we must stress, didn't come to earth as “superman”, who could do anything, and for whom surely 40 days of fasting would have been nothing. No, one of the most wonderful passages in scripture, Philippians 2, reminds us that Jesus “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” In other words, Jesus entered the world with all the frailties and weaknesses of you and me. And 40 days of fasting would have been a huge challenge! Then along comes Satan. Surely, he must have thought, I will defeat this “son of God” just as all other humans have been putty in my hands. Just plant an enticing thought, add a little deception, and his human nature will do the rest. So he came up with some plausible, attractive and sensible answers to Jesus's questions about what kind of Messiah he would be. Offering a straightforward and easy way to achieve what God wanted – perhaps.

First, Satan said, look Jesus, why starve to death? You have miraculous powers. Why not use them for your own needs first – then you can serve others afterwards. So, make the stones into bread! After all, he might have added, the second commandment allows for self love – “love your neighbour as you love yourself”. And then, to become the prophesied king of all, Jesus you

need power – and I can give it to you! After all, I'm the prince of this world, so I have that authority – oh, just a minor detail, you need to worship me. But just think, none of that messy suffering! And yes, to get you well on your way to fame, why not get God to save you from a big fall off the temple? Won't you be a celebrity as the word gets around! They might even ask you on Big Brother. People will hang onto your words! (And by the way see how well I know scripture too!) All these words from Satan came to Jesus, as he was surely ravenous from by such a huge fast.....to act independently of God, but nevertheless in aid of God's objective.....how would Jesus, the man, respond?

Jesus didn't respond by arguing with temptation – that just drags you further into it. No, he responded with the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. First, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'" Deuteronomy 8:3, and he might have added "but from every word that comes from the mouth of God". So no, he might have said, I will not selfishly use miraculous powers for myself, only for setting free those who are suffering under your dominion, Satan. Second, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" Deuteronomy 6:5. So, in other words, no, Satan, I will not worship you even for all the kingdoms of the world. And third, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Deuteronomy 6:16. So no, I will not leap off the temple, even though angels would come to my rescue. Jesus rejected all Satan's temptations with the word of God but also, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He insisted, I will trust God alone, even if his hard road leads me to suffering.

Jesus, the son of God, had defeated Satan where Adam the son of God had failed. And where all other humans since Adam had also failed. Satan had suffered his first ever defeat at the hands of a human. So he retreated, licking his wounds, but as Luke says "until an opportune time". He would be back with Jesus, when Peter tries to dissuade him from his mission and especially in the Garden of Gethsemane. But that is later.

What is relevant to us in this story? It shows Jesus was subject to temptation like we are. He is not some remote, divine being, a heavenly Mr Spock from Star Trek without feelings. He can sympathise with us. As it says in Hebrews 2:18 "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." So he can help us to get out of temptation, as I'll go on to discuss. And he intercedes for us with the father, as he is doing now. And Jesus is showing us how to combat Satan and resist temptation, he is our role model as Christians.

Satan tempting me? Why? You may be asking. And here's the bottom line. By becoming Christians, we become Satan and his demons' number one target. See what it says in John 1:13 for instance "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God". Like Jesus, like Adam, Christians are the Sons and Daughters of God. We are in Satan the sniper's crosshairs. Remember, a large proportion of humanity is in Satan's kingdom already. We are all born subject to him ("when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world" says Galatians 4:3), and non-Christians stay like that. So all Satan has to do is to keep them there, by sowing lies. Such lies are that God is a spoil sport. That Jesus is a wimp. That the church is full of boring, unfriendly, judgemental people. You might have read a great book by C.S. Lewis called the Screwtape letters which shows techniques that demons might use to keep non-Christians in their place. But born-again Christians are Satan's enemies. becoming a Christian is not entering a garden of peace, it's coming into a battle zone. Satan was defeated on the cross but he remains at large, till Christ comes again. You only have to look at the world to see that. Temptation crouches at our door. But we are well armed.

In his combat with Jesus, Satan shows all his cards. He can't force us to go against God, he can only tempt and lie, then accuse and condemn. Planting attractive thoughts in our minds. We have

a fallen nature that makes us vulnerable to his enticement. But we don't have to go along! We are children of God, as Jesus was. Let's see how. Jesus, as we've heard, combated Satan as a human like us, not a superman. He did it with the word of God and his faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Men, hands up if you have seen Gladiator. Those who haven't, I promise we will have an evening of pizza around the manse before too long, to see it. Ladies, I'm not sure you'd like it, but who knows. Well, not to spoil it too much, the story is of a Roman general who is cheated and enslaved. He is tested, and succeeds, as a gladiator. Fighting armed men with just a sword and a shield. And here's the image that came to me. Jesus went into the amphitheatre of the desert as a gladiator, fighting Satan so lightly armed and vulnerable. Just with a sword (God's word) and shield (his faith). And he defeated him.

We too can use the sword of the spirit, God's word, against temptation. See how precious the phrases Jesus used can be to us! 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' For when we are tempted to be greedy, not just about food but any possessions, to be selfish and put our own needs first. 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' When we realise that we are putting something other than God at the centre of our lives, even good things like our career or our family. And 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' When we may bet with God in prayer, I'll only trust you if you do this.

But friends, when we come against Satan, we are not gladiators just with sword and shield, we are fully armed Roman soldiers! We have, as Ephesians 6 tells us, the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness, both of which Jesus won for us on the cross. We'll have a separate sermon on that later, so I don't want to go into more detail. We have one another to protect us against temptation, and the Holy Spirit of God. Listen to these encouraging words there are in Scripture about encounters with Satan. James 4:7 "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." And 1 John 5:18 says "the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him". Jesus is protecting us against Satan.

We must nevertheless remain vigilant. Keep reading Scripture, keep praying, and as Paul puts it "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" 2 Corinthians 10:5. Don't let your thoughts wander on a subject you know is wrong. Seek by all means possible to lead a holy life, as for example not dwelling on our anger which as Paul warns us can "give the devil a foothold". For instance, you could also be accountable to a couple of fellow Christians in a triplet, to whom we can confess our temptations, and so overcome them. Fill your minds with light, which drives out the darkness, as Paul puts it in Philippians 4:8 "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things".

Because Satan and his minions will be back. And there are particular times when they will try their hardest. After a particular spiritual triumph, when we are tired. After baptism is a hard time for testing faith for many of us. Or when we have overcome a temptation – those of you who've given up smoking don't need reminding how hard that was! And when God is giving you a mission in life. Satan will do his best to pervert it, to drive you away from God's will.

Friends, are you facing temptation? How well armed do you feel against it? Are you facing choices in your life? Is God giving you a mission? Or, maybe, when you think about your habitual way of living, do you realise you are giving in to temptation, to gossip, to complain, not to forgive, to serve yourself before others? Do you feel tempted by an alluring person of the opposite sex? There is hope. Because remember, Jesus, our mighty gladiator, met Satan in his

human weakness, just like us. But he triumphed. And so can we! Let's get some sword practice, by reading out some of the key texts – and we can use them in our everyday lives.

Deuteronomy 8:3 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Deuteronomy 6:5: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'

Deuteronomy 6:16: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

James 4:7 "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

1 John 5:18 says "the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him"

2 Corinthians 10:5 "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ"

Ephesians 4:27 Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

Philippians 4:8 "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things"

To finish, we are going to pray together against temptation, using some of the passages I have cited. Let's say the Lord's prayer.