

## *The Testing of Jesus*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
First Sunday in Lent—14 February 2016  
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*Luke 4.1-15*

### **Introduction**

The temptations of Jesus are traditional fare for the first Sunday in Lent. Once again Luke points out that Jesus is both full of the Holy Spirit and is led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God's agent but that agency is always in the power of and in concert with the Spirit (4.1).

But there is another spiritual force at work and this force desires forcefully to bring the mission of God undone. It reminds us that the spiritual realm is real but not all spiritual forces are benign. Indeed, Jesus associated the less benign with violence and lying (John 8.44). It is the realm of the violent, the tricky and the slippery.

And in the wilderness this force has its moment as Jesus is separated from all that supports normal communal human life and functioning. Jesus is vulnerable and made the more so by his severe fasting.

The NT is quite reserved in the way it presents this element of the spiritual landscape. It uses spare language to access levels of reality we tend not to notice in busy lives. Poets use language like that all the time. And this poetic, metaphorical, and imaginative language allows us to access deep levels of reality. And in accessing them great change can come about as we shall see in the exorcisms.

I want you to notice that the diabolos, the devil, does not appear to Jesus or anyone else unlike medieval depictions or horror movies. The devil is not a supernatural figure; spiritual but not supernatural. God alone creates. The devil is a creature, destructive and powerful and the devil assaults the mind, not superficial everyday cognition, but the deepest levels of human understanding; the deep place of values, the view of the cosmos we hold, our unspoken fears.

### **The vocation of Jesus**

What we are dealing with here is the vocation of Jesus. What is Jesus' calling? After all there were many possible ways of being the Messiah available to him. The militaristic was the most obvious one. Moving to the desert to found a community was another. Mouthing generalities as a sort of guru about being kind to one another was another.

Jesus was prophet who came to Israel explaining that that they had misread their vocation. They were called to be the light of the world. Instead they believed that they were the children of light and looked with hatred, loathing and fear on the children of darkness around them, especially but not only the Romans. Evil was located in the evil world out there among the pagans and their powerful armies and their oppressive regimes. Evil was out there among the pagan hordes. So the solution had to be out there too. Destroy the evil hordes.

Jesus believed that the trouble with Israel was exactly the same as that which troubled the pagan empires. Evil could not be located conveniently outside Israel's borders. It was within the camp. The accuser was within. Jesus believed that the only way to peace and security was to fight the real battle against the real enemy. Jesus refused the notion of the zealous holy war. All around Jesus the ideas that Israel should be restored to an independent theocratic kingdom were argued, debated and turned into ideologies by Pharisees and Zealots. There are at least 10 known attempts to put this ideology into practice in Pilate's time alone.

Jesus was saying: 'Don't look outside yourself to project on to others your own failings and evil, don't demonise the Romans as individuals or its institutions. Look to yourself. The battle is here.' We need to hear that. We too easily demonise others, we demonise movements e.g. ISIS or religions, Islam. Evil is not out there. It is here.

### **The three temptations**

*The accuser tempts him to turn God's vocation and the gifts and privileges that go with it to his own self-satisfaction.*

The first temptation homes in on Jesus' most obvious vulnerability, hunger. Make yourself a loaf of bread and feel better. After all you are the son of God. The temptation is to set aside faithful obedience in serving God. Will Jesus act in concert with the Spirit and show resolute trust in the God who provides or will he relieve his hunger by acting out of concert with the Spirit?

Instead of seeing himself as the light of the world he should expend the energy of the light on himself. He has the power to do what is suggested. But does he have the authority? That is the real test here for Jesus. Will he take the way of self-fulfillment? Will he look for popularity by turning it on for the populace? Will he use the creation for his own selfish desires be they hunger, greed or power?

Can you see the temptation for the church and ourselves here? We have the same vocation as Israel: to be the light of the world. We have the privilege of handing over to the world the knowledge of what God has done, of the way God has shown his love.

For the individual the modern world demands that the only way is self-satisfaction at any cost. It is the great temptation. This is one of the great battles any modern disciple faces.

Jesus' answer based on Deuteronomy 8.3 acknowledges the need for bread but asserts his own commitment to work in the power of the Spirit and the provision of God.

*The accuser tempts Jesus to bring the nations under his kingdom by violent means.*

The second temptation moves the reader from mundane to spectacular (5-8). This imaginative shift to seeing the nations of the world is not far-fetched and touches deeper reality. Caesar thought he ruled all the kingdoms of the world (2.1, 3.1) but now the true Lord reveals himself (see Revelation 13).

The devil offers Jesus what is not its to give. The temptation for Jesus is to accept a way forward that is too good to be true and promised by the father of lies!

Worship absolute power, worship violence which is the basis of absolute power, corrupt your authority to be the light to the nations and all will be yours. This was the temptation to Israel, it was the temptation to Jesus and we stand waiting his response.

The vocation to be the light to the nations requires unrelenting focus on the oneness of God who makes covenant love and justice with Israel for the sake of the world. There is only one God who alone is worthy of praise and honour (Deuteronomy 6.13).

United with God we will be able to resist the will to power. God's mission for us to be a light to the nations is grounded in the worship of the one true God. In worship we are reminded that true power lies elsewhere and that violent, coercive power puts out the light of God.

And don't think we are not tempted to it. The church may not have the social power it once had but any society provides opportunity for its leaders and people to exercise awful corrupt power over others. We see it in the diabolic horror of child sexual abuse.

*The accuser tempts Jesus to short cut his rescue mission.*

This temptation is framed as a quote from Ps.91 and the Temple is a suitable setting for the last temptation. Again the language of poetry and imagination accesses for us a deeper reality. It is to here to the Temple that the story will wend its final violent way. The Temple is the locus of God's presence, an irony.

Jesus, acting in concert with the Spirit, interprets scripture so he is not fooled by the devil's interpretation of Psalm 91. The promises of Psalm 91 are given to those who live and suffer in faithful obedience, those who, like Jesus, will take up God's agenda through suffering to redeem the whole of creation. Jesus' response from Deuteronomy 6.16 makes that clear. God is not up for examination by the creation.

The temptation is to call upon God to deliver him from death in Jerusalem. The temptation is to avoid the call of God to reverse the world's wrongs. The temptation is to avoid pain, humiliation and suffering.

He resists. The fight will now take place elsewhere. The call to be the light of the world in pain and suffering, in overcoming evil through humiliation is held. The foolish testing of God to see if God would back violence, coercion or celebrity as his chosen way is refused.

So the ministry begins (14-15) in the power of the Spirit. The devil bides its time but Jesus has confirmed that he will live his life in the Spirit's power and presence. Nothing can break that bond which is essential for the fulfilling of the purposes of God.

### **Conclusion**

The light comes to the world through us, not when we are mighty, self satisfied and self indulgent, but in humility, in graciousness, in love in the Spirit.

In our church tradition in the west we have often replaced the Spirit with the institutional church. Luke however is inviting us to reflect on the way Jesus mission and ministry is not only the proclamation of the kingdom in Jesus' words and deeds but also the leading, power and role of the Spirit.

Only in the Spirit is there a possibility that we will emerge from this conflict as the light to the nations. Without the Spirit we shall sink to the depths of seeing ourselves as the privileged children of light, yet full of hatred, bitterness, defeat and self serving. With Spirit we can live out lives that reflect the light that the nations need. Men and women will not be set free if we succumb to these temptations: They will continue to be held in thrall and so will we.