

Testing and Temptation

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 Romans 10:4-13 Luke 4:1-15

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'⁴ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."'

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And the devil^{} said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'*

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. (Luke 4:1-15 NRSV)

Welcome to Lent, the 40 days when we are invited to focus more closely on discovering who we really are, and in so doing to walk with our Lord as our stories move inexorably towards the Cross, and beyond to the Resurrection.

Let's start with a thought experiment. Have you ever played fantasy wishing games : for example toying with the idea of what you would do if the proverbial 'genie from a lamp' granted you three wishes? I admit I have. One of my immediate thoughts when I first heard this idea as a child was that the smart thing to do would be to use one of the three wishes to wish for an

infinite number of wishes, so that anything I wanted could happen. At the time I thought was quite clever, but as we shall see, was the kind of smart-arse thing that I now fear courts disaster. To see why, let's explore how the infinite wishes scenario plays out : if you wish for anything, it will just magically happen. So, what would you do?

I hope I would start off thinking of some genuinely nice, good and loving wishes. But, alas, in my case, given their open ended nature I rather fear that disturbingly quickly quite a few of my wishes might soon heading in quite a banal direction. Money, for example really would be nice - the big Tattsлото win perhaps - so that all my financial issues could go away, and I could do as I please, living a life of ease and comfort, and avoid nastiness. Even if that fantasy partly includes some goody goody elements about giving leftover stuff to family, friends and worthy charities, I have to admit that may in part be guilt assuagement, politics and/or wanting to be liked. Talking about being liked, as I get used to this magical wishing business, and it sinks in that I really can do and have anything I want, I suspect that my wishing might become more nuanced and sneaky : I can wish for anything, and no-one need know this, because of course I can wish away their memories or perceptions and make them think well of me. So, hey, I can with impunity wish for a reshaping of my body, or for that matter a younger or more functional one, I can be attractive, never sick, super fit. I can wish to be successful in whatever form my notion of that might take this week. As I said before, I can even wish that all those people I want to like me, do like me, and in whatever way I like, including make all those people I find attractive find me so too. I could live wherever in whatever lifestyle setting I want, have all those skills I have always wanted, and eat whatever I want when I want it without getting fat. And so on.

If that sounds superficial, selfish, self indulgent and more than a bit scary it is – but hey. Sadly that is what a lot of my desires are like deep down. The wish fulfilment fantasy, like the desert, provides a way of seeing them, and drawing them out. If they are banal perhaps its mainly because they are so common. We are all programmed by a consumer culture that has convinced most of the world, sadly, to think this is a large part of what comprises a desirable life.

Jesus' first temptation in the desert was the suggestion that he turn a stone to bread. This was a temptation to give form to his sensual desires and to magically give expression to them. While my not-so-little wishing game may thankfully have just been a thought experiment, surely for Jesus, as God, this temptation to change reality to meet the desires that came up within him was real. After 40 days presumably he was really, really hungry. And the thought, 'Why don't I just change that rock into a nice freshly baked loaf of delicious bread?' would no doubt seem very alluring. I'm pretty sure I would have given in. Perhaps the inner voice of his human nature would be saying something like this : 'I can almost smell it. Food is natural and important, and surely doing this just once would not spoil some vast eternal plan?' 'And won't this have the added benefit of proving to everyone immediately, including me (because I am being tempted also to doubt myself) that I am indeed the favoured Son of God.' But then perhaps some other saner thoughts might have kicked in : 'Ah, but once I have started changing reality to meet my sensual desires, where am I really going to stop? Where should the line be drawn? Ah, it's here : it is the boundary between what I need, and what I just want. And this is in indeed there in Scripture : "one cannot live by bread alone". Do I need a loaf of bread? No. Then I won't reshape reality to this particular temptation.'

Now when I was talking about my baser temptations earlier, maybe you were

thinking you would not be as self centred and trivial about the use of your new found magical powers as I suggested I might be. I certainly hope so!

You might, for example, have been thinking that you would be wishing into reality many of the things we pray for each week in our intercessions.

Wouldn't it be nice to bring to an end all wars, conflict, and violence. That said, just wishing for these things in a vague and general way could produce some unanticipated consequences. So, for example, you may find yourself actually needing to do some quite specific wishing to decide just how each particular war should end, who will end up with what, what the new power structures should be etc. But then this may not be such a big deal because if things work out badly, of course you can just wish in a new government, or whatever, and see how that works out ...

Hold on, this wishing for good business is suddenly looking tricky. So maybe on reflection you decide that no, you decide to be less ambitious but still good. You decide to use your wishes to magically help your friends or others you know of who are in real need that you come across, to help them sort out their problems and issues in a genuine and non-trivial way. Healing their diseases, their relationships, their mental problems, perhaps. The pattern, though, will be the same. Again, the consequences could be unpredictable and you may find yourself needing to make more wishes to solve new problems you have helped create, and so on. And if things really continue to not work, and the blighters start blaming you having made things worse, or for not giving them exactly what they wanted you to, you can just make them be happy with their lot, by wishing away their ingratitude and making them like you without the embarrassment of them even being aware of this. Pity about their freedom of will, or integrity as human beings, but it's all in their interests.

Hold on, how did we get here? This wishing thing really is complicated.

Surely this is in part because we are talking about a kind of distilled form of power, the power to change reality itself. Playing God, is for a change, the surprisingly accurate popular term for it. All power surely involves an attempt to control or shape of reality into some form that reflects our own desires or inner state. If we had power at the same level that God does - which infinite wishes maybe a proxy for - then heaven help Creation if that inner state is fractured, trivial or neurotic. Oh dear.

All of Jesus' three explicitly stated temptations were about such power because they all involved a temptation to change reality. But his second - and pointedly central - temptation, that of being offered the kingship of the world, is the most explicit and iconic. I reckon a little voice whispers to us all in one form or another : 'You know, all those problems in the world, in my own life, they could all be solved if I only the way I wanted things was what happened, and if I were the one making the decisions. And not only I could fix those problems, and set things right, but if I did then I'd be a hero and people would thank me for having made the world a good place. How can that be such a bad thing?'

Fortunately, I do not have such power to impose my tinny and tin pot views with their tarnished values on to reality much, except through my normal interactions with the world. Which is just as well because turning reality into what I am like on this inside - my desires, thoughts and fantasies - really does not bear thinking about. Perhaps I could find the self control to limit myself and actually, at the beginning maybe I would or could. But knowing that such power is there, and starting to use it, would sooner or later result in a slippery slope. Power is like that.

Assuming power, means assuming control. Satan is among other things a cipher for the urge to control. Control may 'work' in the sense of helping to fix problems, but what are its other effects? My sense of my own reactions is that the more my sense of control - and self satisfaction - grows, the more my sense of God and the divine diminishes.

Most people think freedom comes from having the power to get what they want. A key message of pretty much all real spiritual disciplines, and certainly of Lent and the cross, is that no, real freedom comes from being free of the compulsions to want or fear. Freedom from oppression and leaving the land of slavery. Real freedom about having a real choice in how to respond to things that and our own feelings that comes from a deeper place where we see clearly what is happening and can respond with compassion. And that is the springboard to growing insight and towards transformation.

At this point, Jesus' Scripture-based response to Satan the controller is starting to look like a great, and maybe the only real, way out of this power dilemma. Jesus simply quotes Scripture : *"worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."* "Thy will be done" in the Lord's prayer is as much as anything an escape route from my our own thoughts and conditioning. The way out largely involves finding ways of taking attention off my desires, compulsions and false notions of who I am (who might also usefully be called 'Satan' in this context), and instead to put it on to something genuinely worthy, like love, enlightenment and God.

This is a good time to ask whether all those desires and mental states I have been talking about really 'ours'? We have this tendency when a desire arises to think "I want X". We associate the desire with us. I reckon the early Christians were much smarter. They were more inclined to say simply that

"desire or thought X" has arisen in my heart. It is not necessarily my thought, it could have come from anywhere, including my heart (because Jesus said that this stuff does flow out of our heart as my temptations earlier suggest), but it could also be from the devil. The Church fathers are clear that the fact that an unwholesome thought has arisen is not itself a sin, but how I respond to it does matter. If I just mindlessly act on impulses that arise in me without making choices, then I will sin. And if I keep on doing it, the risk is that habits form, mindfulness decreases, and a deeper question then arises as to whether I end being much more than a vehicle for a bunch of desires (or 'passions' as the early Christians called them) having their way.

As my thought experiment thus far has sadly demonstrated, this is a genuine issue. A great many of my own thought patterns and desires really are vacuous, pointless, tedious, unattractive, somewhat ridiculous and scarily compulsive, even if I recognise my (now understandably) neurotic ego keeps on trying to suggest otherwise. A lot of what I thought of as me, really does look like more like a knot of ropey thought patterns and passions.

I have used the word 'neurotic' a few times so far, which some of you may have balked at, and maybe that's just me. But if we want biblical evidence that the ego - the sense of I - aspect of the human condition is indeed neurotic, then we need look no further than Jesus' third, and seemingly very odd, but psychologically very interesting, temptation. Remember, he suddenly finds himself on the very pinnacle of the temple and Satan invites him to throw himself off so that God will rescue him because he is so important. This bizarre temptation almost seems almost like a psychotic episode. Maybe for that very reason that image of Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple deciding whether or not to throw himself off is haunting. But perhaps its haunting nature is

because we intuit deep down that our sense of who 'I am', of our selfhood, is really a bit fragile, sensitive, and half formed. We all try to behave like grown ups with a grown up perspective most of the time, but within all of us surely there is also deep down a needy little child who feels separated, and whose vulnerability cries out for attention and to be thought of as special.

And maybe this is one reason why all the other desires we have been talking about manage to get such a footing. As low grade as many of them are, they can help reinforce a sense that we exist, and even help us to define a sense of who we think we are. No doubt Satan would love us to think we were no more than our passions. In turn this perhaps helps explain why so many people are inclined towards personal dramas, power games including violence and almost wallowing in odd forms of suffering. If you don't believe me, just take a look at television, which is full of it. We humans love this stuff. We really are very odd.

In Jesus' case, the ego drama piece plays out in the idea that his specialness would mean he would survive a fall from the ultimate messianic stage set, so perhaps he should do something dramatic to indulge this. His subtle and clever response to this perhaps deepest, most subtle and clever temptation was not to deny his own specialness, nor to argue with the particularly high camp drama of it, but rather simply to recognise Satan's hand, and skilfully to deflect it in a way that simply says 'I am not going there'. "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test", he says. Ego drama over.

And then St Luke simply says : *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.* Satan leaves, but never for good. Temptations and the urge to control never do, maybe even for God. In fact, we know of at least one other temptation time for Jesus, which ties in with

another Lenten theme. Jesus was tempted during what for us will be Holy Week, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Without opening up what is a whole new sermon, I will simply pose a question. As a another domain of power wishing, if you were suddenly presented with the imminent prospect of your own painful death, humiliation, loss of your life's work and value and really had the magical power to wish an alternative path, an alternative reality into existence, what would you do?

The marvel of the stories of temptation in the desert is not for me so much that Christ resisted the temptations that we all suffer from. If it were just that, he becomes a cardboard cut out figure who was simply stronger than me. Interestingly, our popular culture which has lost so much of its Christian heritage is really into power fantasies along the lines of my wishing game as one of its few remaining vehicles for exploring spiritual themes, even if in degraded way. Think of all the movies and television series where people find themselves with superpowers. At one level most of these as work present the protagonist confronting external demons often in archetypal good versus evil setting. But the better superhero stories all end up being more about the hero having to realise he or she has inner demons, and needing to work those out in order to grow and work out who they really are. Which is maybe not such a bad summary of what Lent is about, in fact. Anyway, Jesus' story in the desert is for me more in that vein, but in a much more grown up and sophisticated way. As we have seen, as we go deeper into it, it opens up just how much I need healing and what scope there really is for transformation.

At the same time, the story also shows how God had, and presumably still faces, temptations beyond anything I can comprehend or experience. The nature of those shows how deeply He understands us and what our problems

are, and that God has found a way out, a way to subvert the demonic forces in our hearts of compulsion, deception and the urge to control.

God of our healing, lead us into a spirit of true repentance this Lenten Season that we may fruitfully explore with depth and sincerity how we really work. Save us from feelings of guilt or despair as we do the necessary therapeutic work, and give us a clear sighted vision of the goal and pathway to transformation as we prepare for Holy Week. Sustain us and guide us. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who showed us the true use of power, and why it was that your will should be done. Amen.