Sermon for 1st in Lent Year C

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

i

The Temptation of Jesus is how we usually refer to today’s Gospel story, but it might help us to see it also in terms of The Testing of Jesus.

Luke 4.2 says that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to be tempted/ tested. The word *peirazomenos* has both meanings; it can simply mean to test something, to push to the limit – or it can mean the more negative tempt into immoral and profane action.

Clearly Satan has this latter meaning in mind – to tempt Christ away from the path God the Father has called Jesus to follow. Yet I think it helps to keep in mind the other meaning of the word, the more neutral *testing –* for that helps us understand Luke 4.2 when the Holy Spirit leads Jesus out to the desert to face the devil.

Testing may result in failure – and in this case failure would be to fall into temptation in the immoral, profane sense of the word. But testing that is overcome strengthens rather than weakens. In this sense, the Spirit may be testing Jesus through Satan in order to strengthen Jesus for what lies ahead, to help clarify the nature of his calling.

Satan may try to make himself God’s vice-regent to whom Jesus should show honour and obedience; Satan acts as though he has the power to give Jesus the power and riches of the world. But Satan is confused. He is not able to use Jesus for his own malevolent ends, but on the contrary, he is being used by the Spirit to prepare and equip Jesus to face the challenges ahead.

However strong and clever evil thinks itself to be – it is never ultimately a match for God.

ii

The testing in the desert for forty days is a clear parallel to the OT story of Israel’s Exodus wanderings.

Jesus represents the first of the New Israel who will resist the temptations before him to which the Israelites succumbed in their day.

The first temptation or test is to turn the stones to bread. The text suggests this takes place at the end of the forty day period, when Jesus would be at his most vulnerable, at his hungriest.

The Israelites had received their bread from heaven, their own Manna in the wilderness, because they demanded it. They did not trust God. They were supposedly God’s children and yet they feared God would let them starve to death in the desert and were even contemplating returning to slavery in Egypt in order to satisfy their hunger.

Despite the signs and wonders of the Plagues of Egypt and their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, they did not trust God for long that He would care for his children.

“If you are the Son of God,” taunts the devil, “do the same; turn these stones into bread.” The Israelites got their bread, but they wanted it for themselves, they wanted it because they were putting God to the test. They were saying, “If we truly are God’s children, prove it again and give us bread.”

Jesus is now the one being tested; if you truly are the Son of God as you believe through the birth stories in Luke 1-2, the story of Jesus teaching the scholars in the temple as a 12 year-old in Luke 2 and because of the voice from heaven at his baptism in Luke 3, then why not prove it by turning these stones into bread.

Jesus did not doubt his Father. He was secure in his sense of being the Son of God.

He was therefore able to be the one who would, rather than demand bread for himself and his own short term personal needs, become the Bread of Heaven and give bread to the world through his Body, the sustaining bread of life of the Eucharist.

The Church faces the same temptation every day.

Do we really trust that we are the New Israel, that we are the children of God? Are we tempted to give it all up when the going gets difficult and settle for non-spiritual sustenance alone?

Would we prefer slavery to a materialistic world view rather than trust God to satisfy our deepest and truest needs?

Do we make the Church into the provider of bread for this world at the expense of offering the Bread of Life? It is very tempting to try and make ourselves relevant to a secular world by becoming involved in social justice projects like affordable housing, aged care or family violence campaigns and keep quiet about the more difficult sell – offering Jesus as the saviour of the world.

iii

Satan then offers Jesus all the power and wealth of the world, if Jesus will just bow down and worship him. Satan assumes the world was his to give.

Firstly, Jesus does not accept that the world belongs to the devil; he believes that ultimately the world still belongs to the Father. It is part of the deceit of the demonic to act as if it has taken over ultimate control.

Secondly, is the relationship the devil is offering to Jesus the sort of Lordship Jesus wants anyway?

The Israelites forgot the message of Deuteronomy 26. They treated the land as if it were their own – by birth-right or by prowess. They forgot that the land was theirs as a gift from God. The instructions in Deuteronomy 26:3 to offer the first fruits to the Lord is a way of acknowledging their special and privileged position in the land and their duties to all the nations which the covenant relationship of Abraham included.

Their tenure of the Promised Land was to give them a platform from which to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis12.3), not simply to exploit for their own purposes.

So Jesus does not want to rule the peoples of the world by power; nor does he wish to own the world for his own selfish purposes. He is not interested in worldly power or wealth themselves. The only dominion the crucified Lord longs for is the dominion of love.

Yet the Church has fallen victim to this temptation on many occasions. For centuries after Constantine the Church has sought to hold temporal as well as spiritual power in the world. It has promised worldly prestige and wealth to its elite; it has grown fat and complacent on the tithes and labour of peasants.

The Church has acted as if it should own the world and control everybody in it.

How far removed this is from the example of the Shepherd-King, who gives his life as a ransom for many.

We have spoken of the sovereignty of God, but acted as though the devil holds all the cards. We have told ourselves we act in the best interests of the world, yet too often we have acted to bolster our own power and prestige.

The demise of Christianity in the West has given the Church an opportunity to re-find its soul and refocus its mission. We are a people who serve a crucified God. Any power the Church has should be a power not imposed by the Church itself, but a power entrusted by the people.

Now there is so little prestige or power or wealth to be had by belonging to the Church, we can now be true to our calling again. The demise of the Western Church may well turn out to be a blessing.

We cannot serve God and mammon. We cannot bow the knee to the devil and follow God faithfully. With the demise of Christianity we are now free again to follow Christ, for his sake, for the world’s sake, free from compromised motives searching for worldly acclaim.

Once again, the devil may think he’s winning the battle because the Church appears to be so much weaker than in the past – yet when we compare the papacy for example of the past with the papacy of today, or the social status of the Anglican Church with its status today, we see that we are freer now than we have been for centuries to follow Christ. Those who wish for worldly power and wealth no longer clutter the Church’s ranks – they make their fortune elsewhere.

The devil’s apparent ascendancy may in fact be the Church’s next opportunity to be itself. However strong and clever evil thinks itself to be – it is never ultimately a match for God.

iv

The third test or temptation for Christ is to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple.

Deuteronomy reminds the people of Israel that the Levites who own no land must be cared for by the people. Yet legitimate observance of religion turned into an almost superstitious belief in the protective presence of the temple.

Jeremiah warned the people not to rely on saying, “this is the temple of the Lord,” as if that talisman would keep them secure irrespective of their obedience to God.

The temptation to throw himself from the temple to allow the angels to carry him safely to ground is the temptation to use his spiritual power to coerce belief and loyalty.

Jesus shows enough of himself to attract people’s attention and to demonstrate the nature of his mission in the miraculous healings, miraculous feedings and his power over the wind and sea, but only three of the Twelve are granted a privileged view of his Transfigured self and only his closest disciples are granted a view of the Resurrected Christ.

Jesus shows himself in Resurrection appearances, and later through the blessing of the Holy Spirit to those who wish to follow him, but Jesus does not publicly display his resurrection to the world and thereby *demand* that they believe.

Once again the Church has fallen prey to this temptation many times.

Some church communities display an obsession with signs and wonders, looking constantly for convincing proof that they are truly the children of God. They wish to demonstrate spiritual power in order to impress, dominate and manipulate people to believe.

Jesus is content to give the world a sign of his own choosing –a sign not of power, triumphalism and glory – those signs are kept for those who have already believed – but the sign Jesus gives is the cross – a sign of humble self-sacrifice, of absolute obedience and unquestioning faith in the Father.

The devil may have thought he would win the day when Jesus chose not to offer the irrefutable tokens of his glory to a disbelieving world. The devil may have rejoiced that Jesus intended offering no sign of power but the cross.

However strong and clever evil thinks itself to be – it is never ultimately a match for God.

The devil left Jesus, “for a while”, says the Gospel. He came back again when he spoke through Peter when he tried to prevent Jesus going to Jerusalem to meet his death. Satan spoke again through those who urged Jesus to save himself, if he was the Son of God, and come down off the cross. The devil must have guessed by then that he was losing. But it was too late. Jesus had withstood the testing and come out even stronger and more resolute than ever.