

Tempted to indulge? Try the Word of God!

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13 ESV)

We have entered the Lenten season – wiped the ash from our foreheads from last Wednesday – and possibly engaged in conversation with the general public about giving up caffeine or chocolate for Lent (which might be particularly difficult as our shops are full of Easter eggs). The world may not know, understand, or appreciate what Jesus has done but there is general knowledge that in Lent people give up something – fast in some way – for some reason or other. Such fasting then suggests temptations because you want what you're not getting and so Lent and temptation in popular mind-set go together.

This might be a good thing except that the world is quite ambivalent towards temptation itself. Oscar Wilde said 'the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it' (in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*). George Bernard Shaw declared, "I never resist temptation, because I have found that things that are bad for me do not tempt me". And this one is more of a bumper sticker slogan – "the trouble with resisting temptation is it may never come your way again".

Now the world does expect people to resist the temptation to do overtly wicked and bad things to others but if something is personal, affects no one but yourself or others in 'small' ways, then there really is no reason why you should limit yourself. Resisting temptation is all about limiting yourself and not giving free reign to yourself and we are certainly fed the subliminal and, at times, overt message – indulge yourself – you're worth it.

What harm is there in turning rocks to bread? If your adversary is prepared to give up his position or stance or possessions if you compromise, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with using your power to get a job done quickly?

Well, for me – the first one is impossible so it's not a temptation. The second one, might make good sense in a marriage but not if the compromise involves exchanging truth for a lie – and so the temptation is contextual. And the third one seems sensible – efficient – unless the outcome is not what you thought it would be. Of course these situations are not really mine to face – that's the way of temptations – they are remarkably personal things – but they were faced by Jesus of Nazareth immediately after his baptism, having heard the voice from heaven declare him to be God's Son – he is now in the wilderness – and there seems to be not much to do there except think and get hungry and thirsty.

"If you are the Son of God ...?" Is this another invisible voice challenging Jesus, niggling him, goading him about his identity – and like a little child poking his tongue out saying 'Prove it! Prove it!' is Jesus being hassled about what his baptism means? Or is there no cloak and dagger between two adversaries – maybe there's an earthly recreation of the opening scenes in *Job* where Satan walks into heaven almost bored and chatting to God – and the Devil is really saying "since you are the Son of God ... come on, turn rocks into bread, bow down to me once and I'll give up, and make a big splash of your powers and the crowds will

follow you”. However Jesus is being tempted, what is at issue is really what sort of Son of God is he going to be?

Jesus counters each temptation with the only thing he has with him – God’s Word learnt and memorized in the synagogue, possibly discussed with his parents, maybe discussed annually on his trips to the temple as he was growing up. This word is part of him and in it he finds replies – It is written: people do not live on bread alone – worship only God and serve only him. And when the Devil picks up what Jesus is doing he tempts Jesus with God’s word by also saying ‘It is written’ (that God will send his angels so you won’t hurt your toes from your spectacular leap) to which Jesus succinctly replies ‘It says’ and cutting to the chase – don’t test God – don’t play God’s word off against God’s word to produce the outcome you want. And the devil departed – not defeated – not yet – but more for regrouping, reconsidering strategy, looking for another opportunity.

The temptation of Jesus is an interesting beginning to his public ministry – hunger, thirst, no 5 star hotel beds and room service, groupies, or personal assistants – just struggle and wrestling – almost a microcosm of his earthly ministry which he will graphically intensify with phrases such as “taking up one’s cross” and “when I am lifted up” foreshadowing it seems his death at which voices again washed over him “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt 27:40).

Today we are here in the wilderness – imagining a 40 day experience – *because* we know where Jesus wound up – on that cross and he didn’t get off it with all his power, nor did he secretly give himself a nice analgesic, nor turn his executioners into frogs – and we begin to get a sense of who Jesus is when we say the religious phrases – truly human and truly God – and the mystery of his existence – powerful as God yet one who emptied himself and became a servant, even unto death. Now someone like that has got to be tempted to take the easy way out. I would have – you would have – and he ... was tempted but he resisted and trusted God’s word.

Why?

Because he was here on earth *for you*. His mission was rescue – salvation – the new Adam recreating things as originally intended – by dealing with what had ruined everything – sin (which means you and me) and its consequences of suffering and death, and the demonic cheer squad that wanted everything to spin out of control. Jesus dealt with this through his obedience and trust in God’s word – a course that took him to the cross.

His cross and empty grave are the reasons why Christians follow him still today and also seek to live in a relationship with him – a relationship he has established in baptism – giving us a life that he knows exactly what is like for us. Indulging ourselves is a delusion that does not ever give what it promises. Jesus gives us himself for each day – through his Word, in baptism, strengthening us in Holy Communion – and whatever whispers, suggests, or tempts us to back away from or not trust Jesus is harmful for us. And Jesus sends us into this world each day – into our relationships, our families and communities, to work for peace and justice and harmony. When we are tempted to go our own way in these relationships then all we will have is God’s Word to help us – but that will be enough for Jesus will help us daily to follow him through trials and temptations as one who understands ... and, more importantly, as one who helps.