



## Luke 4.1-13

### Intro

Today's gospel reading, often known as the *Temptation* of Christ, is better understood as his *Testing*. When we looked at the Transfiguration last week, we noticed how Luke speaks of the mission of Jesus as a *new exodus* similar to the OT exodus in which Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but far greater in its scope and its depth. The same comparison is in view today, as the testing of Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days begs comparison with the testing of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years, between leaving Egypt and entering the promised land.

*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.*

Deuteronomy 8.2-5

The key OT passage in understanding the significance of both the testing of Israel and the testing of Jesus is Deuteronomy 8, supported by Deuteronomy 6. As we shall see, these are the very texts which Jesus relied on in order to dismiss the devil and to survive his wilderness test.

As well as linking the experience of Jesus to that of OT Israel, I want to link it to our experience, particularly as we begin this 40 day season of Lent. Because we need testing too. And although we can all see how this principle and this discipline applies in many other aspects of life, e.g. medicines, sports, military equipment, I'm afraid we are often too casual about applying it to our spiritual lives.

The very beginning of our reading alerts us to this point, as we see Jesus, fresh from his baptism (confirmation/ordination) full of the Holy Spirit, walking away from the river Jordan ... and it is the Spirit who leads him into the wilderness to be tested. If testing was necessary for the anointed and Spirit-filled Son of God, it is certainly necessary for us. We'll come back to that point but first let's look at the three specific tests Jesus faced, as recorded by Luke.

### Test 1

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 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.'*

Luke 4.1-3

The first way in which the devil tests Jesus is at his point of greatest vulnerability, his extreme hunger. But isn't it interesting how Jesus has *deliberately increased his vulnerability* by fasting for the whole forty days? Why would he do that? If you or I were taking a journey into the wilderness for whatever reason, we would take supplies of food and drink. Presumably Jesus took water, although we are not told. Or perhaps a limited supply of water was available in this wilderness, but no food. Of course he was hungry at the end of it; he was on the verge of starving to death! But Jesus was clearly aware that his test was like that of Israel and as their only source of food was God, he was determined that this would be his only source of food.



Jesus must also have been aware of the unique powers he had. It would be no temptation for you or I to be told to turn a stone into bread because we simply couldn't do it! For Jesus it would be a simple matter, a word would be enough, as Jesus and the devil both know, but of course Jesus recognized that to do so, although physically nourishing, would be spiritually devastating. And so he answered:-

*It is written: "People do not live on bread alone."*

Luke 4.4

He is quoting Deuteronomy 8.3 (*People do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*)

Again we may think Jesus has been somewhat reckless in deliberately abstaining from food for such a long time. Perhaps he had in mind the rest of Deuteronomy 8, which clearly warns about the dangers of forgetting God when we are comfortable and well fed. The spiritual discipline of fasting is correctly rooted here and I will come back to that later.

### Test 2

The testing of Jesus is not over. Having undergone extreme physical hardship and spiritual pressure to survive the first test he is now offered an easy way of completing his mission (or a subtly distorted version of that mission):-

*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 splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.'*

Shortcuts are always tempting; especially if they are presented to us in a way which seems to fit our life goals. We are taught in both OT and NT of God's plan to put all the fallen powers of the world in their proper place under Christ (e.g. Isaiah 45.22-23, 60.3, Philippians 2.10-11, Ephesians 1.9-10) and here the devil offers this to him on a plate. Rather than winning his victory through what Jesus must already suspect would be a painful journey, culminating in the cross, he could have it all now, simply by worshipping the devil. Wouldn't his Father be pleased with him? Actually, no!

Jesus knew that to worship the devil would break the first commandment and that, in any case, the offer was a lie straight from the father of lies. More correctly, it was a partial truth, because there is a sense in which all the powers and kingdoms of the world have been given over to the control of evil powers, epitomized in the devil. But the devil has neither the power nor the intention of handing control back to God, the rightful owner. He needs to be defeated by Christ and in fact this will be achieved through the cross.

Most of us know from experience that if an offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true. That is certainly the case with the offer made here to Jesus. The devil promises the earth but can't deliver and what he is really aiming for is to break Jesus's relationship with God. This would spell disaster and Jesus replies:-

*'It is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."*

Luke 4.8 (citing Deuteronomy 6.13)

So the first test attacked Jesus at his point of greatest vulnerability. The second offered him a deadly false shortcut to achieving his goals. What of the third test?



### Test 3

*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.'*

Here the test is more subtle. Jesus has resisted the first two by quoting scripture, but the devil knows scripture too and here he quotes Psalm 91.11-12 to test Jesus. He quotes it accurately too. He doesn't even take a few verses out of context and say something which runs against the meaning of the Psalm. Psalm 91 really is about the safety and security of those who put their trust in God, *dwelling in the shelter of the Most High*. Why shouldn't Jesus do what the devil suggested and throw himself off the tower. Surely God's angels would prevent him from injury and this spectacular display of his authority would display his credentials to everyone - and how appropriate that this would take place at the temple!

But Jesus recognizes that the devil is twisting scripture for his own evil purpose. The Psalm encourages believers to live humble, trusting lives, which is not the same as testing God's love for us. In fact in many places, scripture commands us not to put God to the test, significantly in Deuteronomy 6.16, with which Jesus replies:-

*'It is said "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

It is good for us to test ourselves and for God to test us, but we are never to speak or act in a way which puts God to the test.

### Conclusions

So the wilderness testing of Jesus ends with the devil leaving him *until an opportune time*. Further battles will follow in the coming months and years, culminating in the incredible reversal at the cross, where the devil's apparent victory over Jesus becomes instead his total defeat.

All that will come later, but for now Jesus leaves the wilderness to start his ministry, physically weak but spiritually strong. He survived his ordeal with no resources at all, except the only two things he needed. He was filled with the Spirit and he knew the Scriptures. These same resources are available to us and we need to learn to rely on them as we too are tested.

We may prefer to avoid the whole ordeal and may be foolish enough to think this is possible. However:-

- Effective disciples need to spend time being tested in the wilderness. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and the power of the Spirit and of Scripture were demonstrated in these extreme circumstances.
- Christians don't have to fast, but it can be a useful spiritual discipline. It can be difficult to really hunger for God when our bellies are full of rich food, when we are living in comfort and surrounded by toys and gadgets. We need to hunger for God, to want him and to eagerly seek him – without being distracted or weighed down by junk. How can you achieve that? Fasting may be part of the answer, temporarily denying yourself some food or other comfort in order to be fed spiritually. But don't be too ambitious to begin with! See me for practical advice on how to introduce fasting into your pattern of life.



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- Like Jesus we need to know the Scriptures and this does not mean having a casual acquaintance with a few favourite verses. It means studying prayerfully to discover God's purposes as revealed and our place in those purposes. That's why Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6 and 8. Through Home Groups, courses like Roots1 and Routes2 and other good quality study materials, we can become strong and confident in all situations and able to notice and avoid wrong use of Scripture.
- Like Jesus we also need to be aware of the devil's tricks and tactics. If he attacked Jesus at his most vulnerable point, he'll do the same to you. We all need to be honest with God about what our weaknesses are and learn how God, the Church and our Christian friends can protect us from self-destruct. We are equally likely to be tempted to chase unrealistic shortcuts to success and happiness and even to test instead of trusting God's love for us.

Let's make this a good and significant Lent for ourselves and for St George's Church, following the example of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.