

## **Temptation in the wilderness.**

When you heard the opening of this morning's gospel reading, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." (4:1-2a), what did you think? What images came to mind?

Because I think there are key elements in this reading that have perhaps lost - if not their meaning - then at least their edge - to modern listeners.

To start with, the term 'wilderness' has a distinctly different popular meaning today than it did even fifty years ago. We see places of great natural beauty pictured and described as 'pristine wilderness'. Nowadays, the wilderness is often an exclusive holiday destination: the South-West wilderness of Tasmania, the rainforest wilderness of North Queensland, the wilderness of the African savannah and so on. The modern sense of wilderness is often of places people want to go. It often has more in common with the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Old Testament, than in the wilderness that we hear of in the gospels.

And then there's the 'he was tempted' part. If you wonder what the modern interpretation of 'temptation' is, then one trip to Coles or Woolworths will tell you. Temptation is how chocolate is marketed. Temptation, in the modern sense, isn't something to be avoided, but something to be indulged. From the waiter who says "Can I tempt you with the dessert menu?" to the biscuit isle at Coles or Woolies. The word 'temptation' in popular culture denotes something good and enjoyable (but perhaps a bit fattening), rather than something potentially corrupting.

Today's reading, from Luke's gospel, is difficult because it's about temptation. And not only that, it's about the devil.

The devil - the tempter, the deceiver, Satan, makes only a few appearances in the bible, and doesn't get mentioned much in churches these days. In modern times, the devil is generally ignored, and if mentioned, is often mocked: The thin moustache, the pointy beard, the red outfit, and the pitchfork - a cartoon villain.

We don't know how the devil came to Jesus - I'm pretty sure he wasn't wearing red tights and carrying a pitchfork... I guess he might have been a

shadowy, robed figure... he may have been some sort of disembodied voice. This is just one of those things we don't know.

But though we don't know, Luke and the other gospel writers – tell us about Jesus encountering the devil, and it seems to me, that there is evil at work in the world. Evil that sometimes transcends what humans might come up with on their own.

“The Devil made me do it!” was historically an excuse when people were caught doing something they shouldn't. It's a convenient defence. But, generally, the Devil, the tempter, can't really make us do anything – as we see in this reading, the Devil tries to persuade ... to tempt.

Our reading tells us that Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit and he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. And there, in the wilderness, he ate nothing, and then after forty days, when he was famished the devil tempted him.

The devil begins the temptation with a challenge when he says “If you are the son of God...”. It's a trick. The devil is making it hard for Jesus to respond without being wrong. If he doesn't do what the devil tempts him with, in a sense he'd be admitting he wasn't the son of God.

We get challenges like that. If you really care about suffering children you will give to this charity. If you really care about the environment you will write to your local member. If you really care about your country, you will vote this way.

But here, Luke tells us, the devil says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread”. Although at this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus hasn't performed any miracles, we know that he can. Water into wine as we heard a few weeks ago in John's gospel. Miraculous catches of fish. Later on, loaves and fishes to feed the multitudes. And so on.

A simple stone into a loaf of bread would've seemed simple by comparison. And it doesn't seem too bad either. Hardly an extravagant thing at all.

And besides, feeding people who are hungry is not a bad thing – Jesus speaks harshly of those who choose not to feed the hungry, and he feeds the hungry himself several times.

So the devil challenges Jesus on two counts – to demonstrate that he is the son of God, and to feed himself.

Jesus responds with scripture – a quote from the book of Deuteronomy – “One does not live by bread alone.”(Deuteronomy 8:3).

Of course, temptation is persistent, and the devil doesn't give up: We read that 'The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world'. We don't know how that worked: it may have been flying him up into the skies, it may have been metaphorical in some way. And then he says to Jesus “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.” (4:6-7)

Wow. Everything. Jesus would rule all the kingdoms of the world. Without the hassle of his ministry journey, without the agony of Gethsemane, without the betrayal, without the pain of scourging, without the humiliation of crucifixion and most of all, without dying.

It sounds like a great option for Jesus... but what would the cost be? Worshipping the devil. Turning away from his father in Heaven, and turning to Satan.

And Jesus once again turns to Deuteronomy in response “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” (Deut 10:12).

And then the third temptation: The devil somehow takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him “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.”.” (4:9-11) He is challenging Jesus to put himself in danger, so that God can save him, and the devil quotes scripture (Psalm 91) to support what he says.

Again the challenge is “If you are the Son of God” then you can show it by doing this thing.

But Jesus responds with Deuteronomy again “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut 6:16). Against the devil selectively quoting a scripture, Jesus quotes a scripture which gives a general principle. Yes, God will protect his chosen for God's purposes, but Jesus didn't, and we don't get to set up demonstrations.

Finally, we read that when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him.... And Luke adds, ominously, “until an opportune time.”

As we look back at the temptations that Jesus had, we can see that none of that had bad outcomes. The devil wasn't offering Jesus indulgent banquets, the pleasures of the flesh, or ostentatious wealth. The temptations were far more insidious. Food for the hungry, Jesus ruling the world, personal safety. Good outcomes.

But they would have been good outcomes at a terrible price.

In modern society, the end so often justifies the means. We accumulate wealth and justify that by using some of it for good things and claiming that our prosperity will 'trickle down' to those less fortunate, we tighten social security regulations for all so a few don't rip off the system. We suppress speech so that we can be tolerant. We even sometimes go to war to make peace.

Our temptation is never going to be to turn stones into bread - because the impossible does not tempt us. But the idea behind the temptation is still there for us, and that's to not trust in God. We are regularly are tempted to go outside what God wants us to do in order to satisfy our personal needs or – more likely – our desires.

And sometimes that's because we are not sure or not confident that God will look after us: We know that, in theory, we can trust God, but in practice, we often don't. We scheme and we plan for our own well-being, because we think that God might not be able to help, or maybe God does not know or properly understand our needs, or maybe even because we feel that that we're not worthy of God's care.

Our temptation is not going to be ruling the world at the expense of worshipping the devil, because, well, we can't all rule the world.

We do not have to look far to see the application for today. Our world teaches us to avoid pain, to take the easy way, to follow the path of least resistance. Look after yourself first. Avoid sacrifice. You deserve to be happy.

Or how about just in the spiritual realm. To give into the temptation to do things the easy way is to say, yeah, I'll go to church, but I'm not going to read the Bible on my own. And I'll pray – if there's something special to pray for... and so on. We take the easy way out.

Our temptation is not going to be calling on God to save us as we jump off a tall building – or at least I hope it's not.

But there are many subtle ways that we put God to the test. We do it when we don't make not put the worship of God a priority – and yet we expect God to keep our children and grandchildren on the right path. We do it when we do the wrong thing and then cry out to God to bail us out. We do it when we test the boundaries of God's commandments. God says, "Here is the line," and we, maybe not even consciously, love to see how close we can get to that line. Then we are surprised when fall over it. Then we blame God. But so often it happened because we tested God.

We read in verse 13 that when the devil had finished all his tempting - every test - he departed. Every test. And every test, Jesus resisted. Every one of them.

If we have ever given in to temptation, and I'm going to go out on a limb and say we all have, then we have not felt the full force of temptation. Only Jesus has felt the full force of temptation, and resisted.

The one thing common to all three temptations is that they attempted to distract Jesus from his mission or destroy his relationship with God the Father. When Luke tells us that the devil "departed from him" the original Greek translates literally as he "stood off." This verse reveals that temptation will always be lurking in the shadows, watching, waiting for our next vulnerable moment.

We need to watch for, and be conscious of, the temptations that confront us, whether blatant or subtle, and let's look to the example of Jesus in resisting them.

In his life and death and resurrection, Jesus has given those who turn to him in faith everything. Life everlasting. But the temptation is always to do things the easier way, the quicker way, the cheaper way... rather than God's way.

So let us draw on the wisdom of those that have gone before us, the power of reason that God has given as we test our decisions and actions against the whole of scripture, to work for and with God's plan, instead of selecting scripture to justify what we want from God.

When we are in the wilderness of 21st century Sydney, when we are tempted by wealth and comfort and safety and quick results and easy ways out, when we, as a church, are tempted to turn our focus inwards, let's make sure that

our focus is on Jesus. Jesus who has overcome temptation, the devil, sin and death, and who calls us to turn to him in faith.

In the face of whatever temptation we might face, let us put our hope and trust in the one who has overcome all, in our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.