

Lent 1 2022 – Luke 4 Temptations

Strangeness and Yearning

George Steiner once said ‘The aim of interpretation is, I suggest, not merely to domesticate, to familiarize an ancient book: it is also, and perhaps more importantly, to make strangeness in certain respects stranger’

As we grapple with this text once again we come up against the need to make strangeness stranger. As we examine this account, the first question we have to ask is what could Satan offer to Jesus? Jesus is the Son of the Most High already! Here Satan pretends he has something to offer. And do note that within this group of people there will be all sorts of interpretations about the strangeness of Satan. Is Satan a personified evil, a fallen angel, a dark and negative force, or simply the corrupted self? Whatever you think, it is undoubtedly strange.

Have you ever noticed before that another strangeness is that Jesus ends up doing each of the temptations in more extravagant form? He feeds 5000 from virtually nothing – forget one tempter! Gabriel has already declared ‘of his kingdom there will be no end’ (Luke 1.33) and Jesus will go on to overcome death far more dramatically than a simple death-defying stunt of leaping from the Temple to be caught by Health and Safety Angels.

The strangeness deepens: where Satan wants to make it all about himself, Jesus makes it about others. Satan wants to ‘do it all, have it all, control it all.’ Jesus wants to do what God the creator desires, give things away to others, and enable others to take up their cross and follow. Jesus does not feed himself, but a hungry crowd. Jesus’s kingdom is not of authority and glory of political regimes in history, but one of Justice, and Peace, and Joy in the Holy Spirit. And Jesus’s

being raised up is not to the pinnacle of the temple to throw himself off for angels to swoop in and catch him, but a raising up on the Cross of life that will conquer death once and for all. All that Jesus does is like balm poured out on those whom Jesus loves.

For Satan, the temptations are there to be displays of power. We only have to glance at the news to see where that takes us. Instead, Jesus embraces what Pseudo-Dionysius named 'divine yearning and zeal'. Jesus rejects worldly power – as he embraces not the importance of power, but the impotence of love.

The accounts in both Luke and in Matthew, reveal Jesus going through what the Israelites went through in their temptations in the wilderness. The fact that Deuteronomy is quoted at each stage only highlights this further. So in this text we see a recapitulation which contrasts where God's people fail, and where Christ succeeds. So when Jesus is hungry (Luke 4.2-4) he doesn't grumble against God (as God's people do in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11), but relies on God for filling up with the Spirit. Where God's people put God to the test (Exodus 17.7), Jesus does not (Luke 4.12). Jesus's rejection of idolatry (Luke 4.8) stands in contrast to God's people in the wilderness (Exodus 32).

So often people read the temptations and extrapolate from them: we should go into the desert; we should face our demons; we should learn to quote scripture by heart. Now, I'm not adverse to any of these, but I think we make a mistake if we go down that route as we are placing ourselves in the narrative as if we were the most important subject. Rather, we need to see what God is doing and what God has done, and to yearn to find God in the strangeness of our lives.

What the text tells us is that Jesus here undoes the actions we see in Adam, Abraham and God's people – where they all get temptation wrong. We see a restoration of God to the heart of things. Some of you may know the worship song with the lyrics, 'I'm coming back to

the heart of worship and it's all about you, it's all about you Jesus.' These words, whilst maybe lacking the poetry of some older hymnody, do nail it on the head.

During Lent, our worship changes. We begin each week with the Lent Prose, an ancient cry asking God to hear us and have mercy on us. We leave some of the exuberance of some hymns and tone it down. We omit the Gloria, the song of the angels, as we reflect on this penitential season of repentance. We abandon the 'A' word – saving it for the resounding joy of Easter. Our hymnody and song has a more measured and solemn tone to it as we retreat into these days, and the organ fanfare at the end is diminished to solemnity or silence. And you'll see the solemn purple of repentance, and the Lenten array at the East end. This is done to strip back, to simplify, to remind us of the invitation to go deeper in our yearning and not to just get caught up in the dazzling joy of God's love.

And yet... And yet... the solemn nature of the season is tempered by the reality of our Easter faith which still irradiates our lives and assures us of hope, even in our darkest hours – and the swirling fears around the political and military fragility of our time, even as we emerge from a global pandemic. This season of Lent is a season which means 'Spring' – it's about growth, it's about deepening, and it's about yearning. The light of resurrection hope and God's immeasurable, irreducible, inestimable love still shines brightly. The question for us as we embark upon our Lenten journey, is what is your 'divine yearning and zeal'? There are times when we want to 'do it all, have it all, control it all'. But Lent reminds us that it is not about us, but about God. All the mention of Lenten disciplines, of giving things up, taking things up and doing things we already do better, have no worth at all – let me be clear *no worth at all* - unless they draw us closer to God and deepen our diving yearning and zeal. Or as Augustine put it so memorably, 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you O God.'

So pause and think about what you have committed to for these forty days...

You may have given something up (and Hugh gave a great defence of the importance of this on Ash Wednesday at our services). You may be attending our Monday evening sessions on money and the environment. You may be joining me on Wednesday afternoons for the online session on the Lord's Prayer, or reading one of the Lent books by yourself. Or you might be reading Ellen Davis's lovely little book 'Getting involved with God' and joining Br Joe and me looking at rediscovering the Old Testament and having a couple of sessions to natter about this. Or you may decide to take alms giving seriously and take a *significant hit* to your finances to support the Disaster Emergency Committee's Ukraine appeal. Whatever you do, do *something* and make sure that it passes the test: does what you do deepen your divine yearning and zeal? That is, does it bring you closer to God?

Lent only makes sense when we see it as a season of repentance – that's a time of rethinking, of turning our lives towards God. It's a time to lesson the sense of our abiding obsession of me, me, me. Someone once memorably said that sin is when we put I in the middle. S-I-N. There is a profound simplicity to this, and I often find it helpful. Lent challenges us to ensure that God is placed firmly in the middle. Not, I believe, in the sense of an abandonment, a destruction, of self. But of a repudiation of the false, obsessive, self, and the deeper flourishing of the true self that we find in the heart of God, where we blossom to be the true person God wills us to be. I believe that is the meaning of Revelation 2.17 where we are told we will be given some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name written on it. For white stones were given as an ancient Roman custom to victors of athletic games. The winner was awarded a white stone with the person's name written on it. This was a 'ticket' to a special banquet. So Lent is our time of moving towards this

closeness with God to achieve our yearning and zeal to become one with God, not one with our negative self, nor of the one named Satan.

And finally, maybe I can say that Lent challenges us that it is not so much about what you believe, as who do you follow? As Christians we are called to search for divine virtues of faith, hope and love. The catastrophic destruction wreaked by war shows us the opposite of these virtues. And the tender care extended to those in need shows us the depths of their virtue.

This Lent, let us follow Jesus more closely. Let us abandon our own self-centred temptations and move rather to a deeper yearning to find God in the strangeness and complexity of our lives. Jesus rejects worldly power – as he embraces not the importance of power, but the impotence of love: which of course, will ultimately triumph over all. Jesus proves you can't just memorise a few verses and be safe with that. We have to look to the whole symphonic resonance of the Bible – the journey of Mercy and Kindness – and the revealing of the divine virtues of faith, hope and love. Now that is why Lent is exciting: so let's seek strangeness and yearning. What are you going to do to come closer to God in your life?

Amen.