

Have you ever wondered how the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert came to be in the bible at all? The only two characters there were Jesus and the devil. Do you think the devil turned up later at someone's shoulder when they were wondering what to include and what to leave out, and said "Hey Mark, or Luke, or Matthew, here's a story about me being humiliated and made to look a fool, losing the argument and being told to get lost; make sure you don't miss that one out, will you!"

It must have been Jesus, mustn't it? And when did he tell his followers this story? It's easy (– ish) for us to know about it; we read about his birth, and his childhood trip to the Temple, and his baptism and the start of his ministry, and this is right there, near the beginning. It's quite possible his disciples never knew this for maybe the three years they were following – perhaps when Jesus was resurrected, and spent time with them before the Ascension, perhaps he told them then! And surely it was because it needed to be written down for those he couldn't tell, who would be finding out about him from what was written – people like us.

And scripture is written to help us. So what helps us about his temptations in the desert, what can we learn, how can we be reassured? After all, we're not going to go through the same thing – stones into bread, supported by angels when we jump off high buildings, ruling the world. I know there are some important people here today, but, folks, we're not that important, not ruling-the-world important. So let's look more closely...

Jesus was led into the desert by the Holy Spirit, he didn't go of his own accord. He'd just been baptised, and the Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove. Some dove – Mark's gospel says 'made him go into the desert'. So for us, whichever version of the Lord's Prayer we use, who pray 'Lead us not into temptation', or 'Do not bring us to the time of trial' – can we learn that sometimes what we see as temptations are where we should be – though at other times it isn't God's best plan for us, it is our own silly fault. A trivial example would be giving up chocolate for Lent, but booking a trip to go round the Cadbury factory anyway. We are told to avoid certain situations. That is down to us. If we presume upon our own strength, God may well let us learn, through failure, that we can't do it alone. But if God places us in circumstances of trial, he will be on our side and give us strength.

And isn't it a kind of comfort to us that Christ was tempted? It shows us that temptations are not sins – they are only sins if we give in. And, as he's described in Hebrews, he is our High Priest, who knows, by experience, what it is to be tempted, which means he can be sympathetic towards us, understand what we're going through. But it is much more a comfort to think that Christ conquered; he was tempted, and conquered for us; to think not only that the enemy we grapple with is a conquered, baffled, disarmed enemy, but that we have a share in Christ's victory over him, and through him are more than conquerors. Even if we don't always feel like conquerors, let's remember that we are. We are victorious.

I'm afraid I haven't managed a neat three point sermon today – I couldn't even find a neat beginning, middle and end, because it became so interesting looking through this passage, and it

turned into all middle. For example, something I thought was really interesting, and I wonder if you'll agree with me, was in the Matthew Henry commentary, thanks to the internet. Matthew Henry (18 October 1662 – 22 June 1714) was an English Presbyterian minister, and naturally from those days uses what we think of as old fashioned language. He says *When he fasted forty days he was never hungry; converse with heaven was instead of meat and drink to him, but he was afterwards an hungred, to show that he was really and truly Man; and he took upon him our natural infirmities, that he might atone for us. Man fell by eating, and that way we often sin, and therefore Christ was an hungred.*

Really? Hungry after forty days? Wouldn't Jesus have been hungry *during* the forty days? Well, it doesn't actually say so, it does say 'after'. Can we believe that a close enough communion with God means that we won't be subject to human weaknesses like needing food? I don't know, and I wouldn't like to try it for forty days. Was it really forty days anyway? Some people suggest that this is just an expression that means a long time, and reflected Israel's forty years in the wilderness. (When they complained a lot). When they were fed by God.

Anyway, moving on from that quite interesting, but not conclusive point, to the temptations.

All three of Satan's tests tempt Jesus to betray his identity and misuse his power.

– Jesus had been declared, at his baptism, to be the Son of God. Here the devil tempts him to doubt that. IF you're the Son of God – would you be in such a terrible condition? If God is your Father, surely he wouldn't see you starve? When that voice from heaven said 'This is my beloved Son', were you deluded, Jesus? For either God is not your Father or he is a very unkind one. Similarly, Satan, when he tempts believers, aims to make them doubt that God is their good Father. That would cut off their dependence on him and their duty to him; their relationship with him. The Holy Spirit, as our Comforter, bears witness to our own spirits, right inside, in the very depths, that we are the children of God. It is because of his work in our souls that we can say 'Father'. We might begin to doubt it because of what is going wrong in our lives, as if difficulties and problems shouldn't happen if God loves us. We're never told that. We're never told that life will be easy as a child of God; but we are told that we are loved. Let's not fall for the temptation of doubting that we are God's sons and daughters.

*[I found this in "Morning by Morning" by Charles Spurgeon after preaching, but would probably have included it at the time – Spurgeon says 'The fatherhood of God is common to all His children...Peter and Paul, the highly favoured apostles, were of the family of the Most High; and so are you also; the weak Christian is as much a child of God as the strong one...All the names are in the same family register. One may have more grace than another, but God our heavenly Father has the same tender heart towards all. One may do more mighty works, and may bring more glory to his Father, but he whose name is the least in the kingdom of heaven is as much the child of God as he who stands among the King's mighty men. Let this cheer and comfort us, when we draw near to God and say, "Our Father." ']*

And we too might encounter the temptation of losing faith in God's word and questioning the truth. It started in the garden of Eden, when the snake said "Did God really tell you...?" and it's happening to Jesus; Did God really say you were his Son? So why are you starving in the desert? Command these stones to turn into bread – the devil didn't even say pray to your Father that the stones turn into bread – your Father's forsaken you, look after yourself! Don't depend on God.

But Jesus shows us here to depend on God.

Temptation two – cast yourself down. It seems as though the devil doesn't have the power to give Jesus a little shove and make things happen, and anyway that wouldn't have been Jesus giving in to the temptation. Satan only suggests, persuades – he can't compel. We can be drawn away from doing the right thing and feel compelled because of our own weaknesses, and passions, and desires, but we're not driven into it by some external evil force. The quotation is from Psalm 91, but what is left out is all about trusting in God. (Ps 91 v 9) "You have made the Lord your defender, the Most High your protector" – in which case you are not going to do what Satan suggests. God will not protect those who put themselves out of his protection, and if Jesus had jumped, he would have been out of God's care, because there was no reason for him to do such a thing. We can believe that God will take care of us, but not if we're stupidly doing risky stuff that he hasn't required us to do, surely. Such as showing off. And can we learn from this that we don't necessarily follow what someone else tells us the Bible says, that we consult the scriptures ourselves? Even people we trust – God might be using his word to tell them something different from what he wants to tell us. Let's read the bible for ourselves, and make sure it isn't misapplied, deliberately or unwittingly, to our lives, leading us to do what we shouldn't do. Jesus was sure enough about God as his Father not to fall for the idea of an experiment to prove it. Let's follow his example.

Temptation three! Could it be here that the devil thinks Jesus isn't the Son of God, because he hasn't given the proofs demanded? Is he treating Jesus as a mere man? Surely he knows who he's talking to - but he offers Jesus the world. Jesus doesn't give any thought to this offer, he dismisses it. There's no answering, no swapping of scripture quotes and waiting for the next step in the conversation; the devil has said 'worship me' and that is unthinkable. The only response to this has to be 'Get thee behind me. Get lost. Scram. Go away Satan.' Backed up afterwards by words of scripture. And away the devil went. I'd always assumed, and I think I was told, that it was because his temptations had failed, and he couldn't think of anything else, so he gave up – but that's not why he went. He went because he'd been told to go, and he had to do what Jesus commanded. Jesus could have sent him away at the beginning. Why did Jesus even go through this conversation with him? So that he would know what it was like to be tempted, and so that we would know he would know, and we would trust him because of it.

We will never be in an identical situation, the devil showing up in person - but there are many voices in the world that work against God, both within us and around us. We probably have to be more prepared for subtle and seductive temptations rather than the big bullying obvious sort.

One of the books I was looking at when thinking about this subject is "The Jesus I never knew" by Philip Yancey, but I'm not using anything from it, because there was so much that was so good, we haven't got the time. Buy or borrow a copy, and read chapter 4, Temptation, showdown in the desert. But another good book is *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. A satirical Christian apologetic novel first published in 1942, it consists of thirty-one letters written by a senior demon named *Screwtape* to his nephew, Wormwood, a younger and less experienced demon, who is charged with guiding a man (referred to as "The Patient") toward "Our Father Below" (the devil, or Satan) and away from "the Enemy" (God). After the second letter, the Patient converts to Christianity, and Screwtape tells Wormwood off for allowing this to happen. Throughout the book a

contrast develops between Wormwood and Screwtape. Wormwood, younger and more brash, wants to tempt the Patient into dramatic and extravagant sins. Screwtape, older and wiser, seeks to tempt the Patient in smaller, more subtle ways. As he says in Letter XII, "...the safest road to hell is the gradual one -- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." Unlike the dramatic temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness at the hands of Satan.

I wonder if we're mainly tempted to complain. Perhaps that's what we should give up for Lent – grumbling. I suppose we are tempted, like Jesus, to use our gifts for our own immediate gratification (turning stones into bread), I see that we are not to test God by assuming that God will protect us when we take foolhardy risks with our own lives and the lives of those who trust in us, trying to gain influence and even followers by showing off (throw yourself off the Temple). I understand that we are tempted to make possessions and power our priority rather than God (worship Satan and gain the whole world), but the Temptation story sometimes seems too dramatic and too distant for it to be about us. We're not that important, remember. Except we matter enough for Christ to have overcome temptation for us, to have sent the devil packing; we are the ones whom Christ wants to do his work here, bringing in his kingdom – not with drama and spectacle, but with quiet endurance day after day, for many more days than forty. And without complaining?