

Sermon: Jesus tempted in the desert

Luke 4:1-11, Deuteronomy 8:1-20

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Intro

Our life is full of temptation to live for ourselves and to place ourselves in the centre of the universe. We do not love and obey God above all things, and we do not love our neighbours as we love ourselves. That is why in our worship service we confess every week to God:

[We] have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.

Because we are so morally corrupted, the history of the temptations of Jesus in the desert is very interesting. He did *not* sin. And the temptations he faced represent the basic temptations that we all experience. They are related to:

- Our physical needs, like hunger for food, for things, for love;
- They focus on the human desire for power and possession;
- And they are related to our pride and our doubts about God.

1 The three temptations of Jesus

Jesus had just been baptized, ready to begin his ministry of three years. The temptation story at the beginning of his public life shows us Jesus choosing once and for all what his life would be about.

The first temptation was to turn stones into bread. Our Lord Jesus was in a desert covered by little pieces of rock. The tempter said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, do not be hungry! You have the right to food, and you can do it!"

"If you are the Son of God" – these words sound again when Jesus hangs on the cross. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross."

Jesus is challenged to proof his credibility. If you, Christ, are really the Son of God, and not just another one of the prophets, why not make it clear once and for all. Would that not be nice! You do not need to suffer!

How can Jesus better proof that he is the Son of God, than by creating bread? That is what he needs! What the world needs! Look at all the hunger! If there is a God, and if Jesus is his Son, and if the Church is really the body of Christ – let them solve the problems in the world first, and then we may believe them. Let them solve all my problems.

At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside because we see him as secondary to our immediate needs. We need food, we need money, we need... and we want it now. The idea of fasting, of being hungry, not having *now* what we want, can become more important in our life than God himself. Jesus rejected this temptation completely.

God is more important than my stomach. Bread is not the only thing that counts. My salary, or good government, or stability is not that important. What really counts is whether our lives glorify God. That is why Jesus came. To perfectly live for God the Father.

The second temptation: Jesus is urged to become a worldly king. The devil shows the Lord in a vision all the kingdoms of the earth and offers him kingship over all. This is exactly why God send Him to this world, is it not? Isn't this precisely the mission of the Jesus? Isn't he supposed to be the king who unifies the whole earth in one great kingdom of peace and well-being?

The temptation now is to take shortcuts to reach our goals. Jesus resolutely rejects this temptation for a shortcut to worldly power. And actually, really, he would not have reached the goal, because God's goals can only be reached by God's means.

Later, our Lord is again on a mountain, after he is raised from the dead. The risen Lord gathers his followers on a mountain where he confirms: "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18).

Two details stand out: The Lord Jesus now has power on earth *and in heaven*. Satan only

offers power in this world. Only someone who has this complete authority has real, saving power.

In his beautiful book titled *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI underlines:

Without heaven, earthly power is always ambiguous and fragile. Only when power submits to [God] can it become power for good. And only when power stands under God's blessing can it be trusted. [...] Jesus has this power in virtue of his Resurrection. This means that it presupposes the Cross, his death. It presupposes that other mountain—Golgotha, where he hangs on the Cross and dies.

The route to salvation for the world is via the cross. Jesus rejects the temptation to take a shortcut; he rejects the worship of power but He puts God and His will in the first place. God alone must be served and worshipped.

The third temptation is for Jesus to jump from the temple and test God. Did he not promise to always take care of you? The devil suggests that God must submit to our conditions that prove to He is real. We are dealing here with the question of how we can know God – how we can be sure He is there and that he takes care of us. Jesus could have jumped. But he did not. It would have been the ultimate form of pride: we decide how God has to prove himself.

From where Jesus stood on the top of the temple he could see the place where he would be crucified. He would leap into the abyss indeed, but into the abyss of the cross. He jumped into darkness to display God's love for humankind. And on the top of the temple he realized that his leap into *that* abyss *of the cross* would land him into the loving hands of His Father. He did not need to test the Father by leaping from the temple. He trusted him, and rejected the idea of testing God. In our hard moments we do not test God – we trust in Him.

2 The meaning of Jesus' temptation

What do we learn from this? How do we apply this to ourselves? Before we answer this question we must take a closer look at the story. There is more to say than that Jesus did not fall for temptation and that we should follow him in this.

If we read the story carefully, we see how Luke contrasts the disobedience of ancient

Israel with the obedience of Jesus. Think of this:

After Jesus is baptized, God leads him 40 days into the desert. Just as Israel went through the Red Sea and was in the desert for 40 years.

And Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Israel is my firstborn son'. (Ex 4.22). Just as Jesus is called God's firstborn Son.

And the Biblical responses that Jesus uses to counter the temptations, all come from the first chapters of the book of Deuteronomy. In those chapters we read of God giving Israel miraculous food in the desert. We read of Israel getting power over many nations. In those chapters God commands Israel to obey Him and he says that he tested them in the desert.

"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test", Jesus replied to Satan. In this way he alludes to the passage in Exodus where the Israelites demand a miracle of Moses. Moses told them, "Why do you put the Lord to the test?" (Ex 17:2) Israel presumptuously tested God, but they failed to see that their own desert-life was God testing them.

And here we see the great difference between Israel and Jesus. Israel did not obey God, but here we have Jesus, the great Son of Israel who finally fully obeyed God. This is how the Bible presents Jesus to us: finally someone who obeyed our Lord God perfectly.

Many church fathers also point to the parallels between Adam in Paradise and Jesus in the desert. In Satan's question 'If you are the son of God, command this stone to become bread', we hear the echo of 'Did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden.'

Theodore of Heraclea, he died in 319AD, wrote: "The first Adam sinned by eating. Christ prevailed by self control." (Fragment 22)

And Ambrose of Milan, in his *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke*, notices: 'The first Adam was cast out of paradise into the desert; you observe that the second Adam returned from the desert to paradise.'

Where Israel failed, Christ succeeded. Even more meaningful, where the first Adam sinned, the last Adam obeyed. And this takes the story of the temptations of Jesus in the desert away from just a moralistic story into the realm of salvation history.

3 What can we learn from the story?

Of course we can learn from this story for our own daily life. The lessons seem clear. Jesus has shown us that we must make serving God a higher priority than meeting our own needs. 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given unto thee...'

In our personal life, in our church, in our nation, the good life can only be attained if we put all of our needs and desires under the authority of God. He comes first. And even then, the good life is not defined by our food and our goodies, but by knowing God.

We also learn that we must not try to reach our good Christian goals by bad methods. We listen to God only for our life's goals and for the manner in which we reach those. This means, practically, that we will never live a life different from what our Lord commanded us. Love for God and love for our neighbour dictates how we behave in our families, in our work, in church, in the life of our nation.

And we learn from Jesus that we must not put God to the test. *He* does not have to prove himself to *us*; *He* is the one *testing* us. Our life is for him. Humbly we say: Lord, I believe you are here; I believe your word; I believe in your Son Jesus Christ. Whatever happens to me, whatever cross I have to carry in my life – you are number one.

We can even learn from the story how we have to fight our temptations. Jesus always used the Word of God. But be careful: the devil seems also an expert in quoting bible verses. The debate between Jesus and the devil is a dispute over the correct interpretation of Scripture; this dispute about interpretation is ultimately a dispute about who God is.

But if this is all we learn from this event in the life of Jesus – be good, read your bible - we are to be pitied. If it is not more than a moral lesson, we are doomed. Because we are defeated again and again. Again and again we put ourselves and our primary felt needs in the first place, again and again God is pushed away, outside the centre of our lives. As if God is only an afterthought to help us reach our own goals.

But we have hope! As we saw, Jesus is the true Adam, Adam as God intended him to be. And he is the perfect fulfilment of God's desires for Israel, his people. Finally God had found someone who truly obeyed him perfectly. And this perfect life, ending in the perfect obedience on the cross, this life that was lived fully for the obedience and love for God alone, this has opened the door for God, to offer forgiveness, and full salvation, for all those who become – by faith – part of that perfect God-man, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

God became a man and adopted the dangers and problems of mankind, for there was no other way to lift up fallen humanity. God had to enter into the drama of human existence; this was the core of Jesus' mission; he entered into our world, down to its uttermost depths, because only by doing this he could find us, lost sheep, to bear us on his shoulders, to bring us home.

By rejecting the temptations of the devil, our Lord could atone for the failures of those who went before him and for those who came after him. For us. His perfect life was the value God was waiting for. He is the perfect high priest to intercede for us with God. He beat the devil by standing firm, and so he earned the right and the power to bring us back to God.

Benedict XVI, in his book *Jesus*, writes beautifully:

The earthly kingdoms that Satan was able to put before the Lord at that time have all passed away. Their glory [...] has proven to be a mere semblance. But the glory of Christ, the humble, self-sacrificing glory of his love, has not passed away, nor will it ever do so.

Let us entrust our lives anew to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All other things will pass away. And let us worship God alone, for living life with us, and for accepting the road of perfect love that led Him to the cross and that brought us back to God.