

LUKE 4:1-13
ST JOHN'S, 14.2.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

The number 40 is very significant in the Bible: 40 days of rainfall in the Flood; 40 days between Jesus' Resurrection and his Ascension; 40 years was the time the people of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness – just to name a few. The number 40 is so significant that the Illustrated Bible Dictionary¹ says this: 'forty is associated with almost each new development in the history of God's mighty acts, especially of salvation'.

In this passage, we're looking at the period of 40 days right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus has just been baptised; the Holy Spirit has come down *upon him in bodily form like a dove* (3:22); now, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led firstly – not to preach, not to heal, but into solitude in the wilderness.

JESUS WAS REALLY TEMPTED

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus has just been baptised. He's just heard the voice from heaven declaring, *You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you* (3:22). He's full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is on a real spiritual high – much more intense than any spiritual experience we ever have!

And then, Luke tells us, *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. In all that time he*

ate nothing, so that he was hungry when it was over. One translation says he was 'famished', which I think is nearer the mark! And not only famished, but I should imagine, drained, exhausted, physically, emotionally and spiritually. For forty days, he's lived in complete isolation from any human contact. For forty days, he's lived in the almost total silence of the desert. For forty days, he's eaten nothing. And throughout those 40 days, Jesus has been fighting an intense spiritual battle against the devil. As so often happens in our lives, Jesus' spiritual high was followed by a time of testing.

And it was a hard time. When we read that Jesus was *tempted in every way that we are* (Hebrews 4:15), that's exactly the way it was. Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah; he had special powers, and he knew it; so the devil tempted him to use his powers in ways which would have made him unable to carry out his mission. The devil was very subtle, and very persistent. It took 40 days of hard spiritual battle before the devil *left him for a while* (v 13).

Let's think briefly about each of the temptations about which Luke tells us here, and about how Jesus must have been tempted.

The first thing the devil tries to do is to make Jesus doubt his identity as God's Son. Remember that just before he went into the wilderness, Jesus had heard his Father saying, *You are my own dear Son . . .* Now the devil taunts him: *If you are God's Son . . . prove it to me.* You're famished; you need food; you have the power to provide food for yourself; so *order this stone to turn into bread'* (v 3).

The second thing the devil tries to do is to make Jesus doubt his heavenly Father's wisdom in allowing the devil to have the *all this power and all this wealth* (v 6). Surely Jesus himself could rule the kingdoms of the world so much more wisely? The devil offers him the opportunity to do just that.

The third thing the devil tries to do, apart from casting doubt once again on Jesus' identity as God's Son, is to make Jesus 'step out in faith', to challenge Jesus to show that he really does trust the Scriptures which he keeps quoting, by throwing himself down from the highest point of the temple.

At the end of the passage, we read that *when the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while* (v 13). So this time in the desert wasn't the only time when Jesus experienced temptation. But here we have an account of just how he was tempted, and how he resisted that temptation. So let's think now about how Jesus defeated the devil, and therefore how we can defeat him when he tempts us.

JESUS DEFEATS THE TEMPTER

As I'm sure you've noticed, Jesus refutes each of the devil's temptations by quoting Scripture. *The scripture says . . . The scripture says* (vv 4 & 8) . . . In the final temptation, the devil himself says, *the scripture says* (v 10). But Jesus knows his scriptures – he's not going to be deflected by a quotation used out of context!

The devil tried to plant a doubt in Jesus' mind as to whether he really was God's Son. Fortunately, Jesus was secure enough in his own identity, not to be fooled into proving it. And Jesus knew that he wasn't only God's Son. Jesus knew that he was a human being as well. As a human being, Jesus deliberately emptied himself of his power and glory, and put himself in the position of a human being, under the authority of God's law. So, as one commentator points out, 'the confrontation here in the wilderness is the first occasion in history that a son of Adam has raised an effective defence against Satan'². By doing that, both here in the wilderness, and throughout the rest of his mission, Jesus has given the rest of us the chance to do the same.

Looking at each of the temptations in turn, here are a few thoughts on Jesus' response to each one. Tempted to turn a stone into bread in order to feed himself, Jesus replies *Human beings cannot live on bread alone* (v 4). We're not just animals. If human life is simply about food, drink, and shelter, it becomes a form of living death. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus completes the quotation from Deuteronomy: *Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks* (Matthew 4:4). If we're to have life in all its fullness, then we need to remember that we depend on the Lord God, and we need his word for our spiritual food.

That's not to say, of course, that Jesus isn't concerned with our physical needs. There are times when he does provide food and drink. He has compassion on human beings, and so at Cana, he

saved a wedding celebration from total disaster by turning water into wine; and on two occasions, he miraculously fed crowds of hungry people.

When the devil tempted Jesus to worship him in order to gain the power and wealth of all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus replied, *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!* (v 8). The devil was offering Jesus the throne, but there was a catch: the devil was to be the power behind the throne. We can see all around us, throughout the world, the results of that kind of compromise. In Jesus' life, though, we can see what its like to *worship the Lord your God and serve only him*. It's the only way to gain true freedom.

When the devil himself quotes Scripture to Jesus, Jesus quotes it back to him! *Do not put the Lord your God to the test* (v 12). The devil was challenging Jesus to test God and to abuse his Father-Son relationship. As one commentator says, God's not on probation. There's no doubt about his faithfulness. If Jesus had jumped off the temple, he'd have forced his Father into a situation where he either had to act to avert disaster, or be accused of unfaithfulness.³

Jesus refused to put the Lord his God to the test in this way. Ironically, the devil has just spent 40 days putting the Lord God incarnate to the test! The lovely picture at the end is of the devil going away with his tail between his legs. Sadly, although he's down, he's not yet out. Jesus will have to die on the cross outside Jerusalem, and rise to new life, before the devil is truly defeated.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of ways in which the Lord may well be speaking to us through this passage this morning. One thing we can learn from Jesus' example is the absolute necessity for Christians to know their Scriptures thoroughly. When temptation comes our way, if we don't know our Scriptures inside out, we could well find ourselves in trouble. We can see from this passage that the devil can easily use even the Bible itself to deceive us, if we don't know it properly. Its easy to take texts out of context, and twist them to say something which they don't really mean. Sadly, it happens too often today. For example, the people who are most vulnerable to deception by sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, are Christians who have only a superficial knowledge of the Bible. So, please, if you have no regular, systematic form of studying the Bible, make it a priority to find a method which suits you, and then practise it faithfully. Come and ask me if you need advice on how to get started.

Another way in which the Lord may be speaking to us today relates to the second temptation. It can be summed up as 'the ends don't justify the means'. Jesus could have done endless good if he'd accepted the devil's offer of earthly power and authority. But he wouldn't have been able to save humankind from our sin, and make it possible for us to have an intimate relationship with the Lord our God. So, if you're ever tempted to compromise your integrity 'for the greater good', then don't. Remember, worshipping the Lord your God, and serving him only,

means doing things God's way, no matter how nonsensical it might seem to our poor human intellect.

And finally, the Lord may well be reassuring us through this passage. The devil tried to plant a seed of doubt in Jesus' mind about his status before God the Father. *If you are God's Son . . .* It didn't work with Jesus, but it works so easily with us! The Lord God assures us that each of us is precious to him, so precious that the hairs of our heads are all numbered (Matthew 10:30), so precious that we're engraved on the palm of his hand (Isaiah 49:16), so precious that he sent his one and only Son to live on this earth and be executed, so that we could be saved. But we all know how easy it is to listen to the devil's voice: 'You're precious, are you? You? God knows all your grubby little secrets. He doesn't really want anything to do with you. You'll see'. Brothers and sisters, each one of us is precious to God. Each one of us is his son or his daughter. *He loved you and chose you for his own* (Colossians 3:12). In Christ, we too can send the devil slinking away with his tail between his legs, if only we remember who we are, as Jesus did when the devil tempted him.

¹ J D Douglas et al, eds, The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Part 2), (Leicester, IVP, 1980), p 1098

² Michael Wilcock, The Message of Luke, (Leicester, IVP, 1979), p 60

³ David Gooding, According to Luke, (Leicester, IVP, 1987), p 80