

MATTHEW 4:1-11

ST JOHN'S, 5.3.17, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Looking back over my Christian life, there's one particular time when I felt especially close to God. I was in France, just outside Paris, spending my summer vac as a volunteer in a convent there. One of the nuns described it at the time as a kind of extended retreat, which I suppose it was. Somehow, during those weeks, I was able to feel the Lord's presence in a way I've never really done at any other time, either before or since. I was full of the Spirit, and just longed to spend as much time as I could with the Lord in prayer and meditation.

When I came home, I was determined to hold onto it. But no matter how hard I tried, it wasn't the same! It just wasn't possible to spend as much time with the Lord as I had in France, and even when I did, the feeling of closeness to him was gone.

Even so, that time is still very significant to me, and without it, I probably wouldn't be here today. What I've learnt since is that for many, many people, a 'spiritual high', when we feel very close to God, is followed by a time of testing, a time when we wonder whether God's really there after all. I had several years of testing ahead of me, so those weeks in France stood me in very good stead!

Those of us who've experienced spiritual highs followed by times of testing are in very good company. It's just what happened to Jesus himself! The story we read, about Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness,

and his battles with Satan, happened just after he was baptised, just after *the Spirit of God* had come down on him *like a dove*, just after he and everyone else had heard the voice from heaven declaring, "*This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased*" (Matthew 3:16-17). So we've been on another TARDIS ride since last week, when we heard those same words spoken at the Transfiguration. We've gone back in time now, by a little more than two years.

FORTY DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS

It's worth noting that *the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil* (v 1). God the Father deliberately put his Son into this situation, in order to test him. It's the same with us; God allows us to be tested, because the result will be that our faith will be strengthened, and we'll gain more confidence in our heavenly Father. He'll always be with us; he won't allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear; and when we are tested, he'll also provide a way out so that we can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Jesus found the way out of his testing through his knowledge of Scripture. Three times he refutes Satan by quoting Scripture. We can learn several things from this:

1. It's important that we know the Bible well enough to recognise the devil's tactics. He's not called 'the deceiver' for nothing, and he can quote Scripture at us very easily, subtly twisting its meaning. Would you have realised that in verse 6, when Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus, he leaves out a very important phrase? I wouldn't have done! It shows us just how easy it is 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 likely to be deceived 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. If you don't already use Bible notes, and you think they might be helpful, have a look at the ones we've got in church today, to see if any might suit you – and if you'd like to make an order, write down the details on the sheet.

2. All three of Jesus' quotations come from Deuteronomy 6 - 8, which suggests that these particular chapters are very relevant to this story. In Deuteronomy 6 - 8, Moses describes the lessons which God tried to teach the Israelites during the 40 years they were in the wilderness, before their mission to conquer the Promised Land. We read there that God's purpose was to test them, and to discipline them *as a father disciplines his children* (Deuteronomy 8:5).

Here, Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness before his mission begins. He faces the same tests as the people of Israel had done. God allowed the people of Israel to go hungry, before he fed them manna, to teach them that *human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks* (v 4; quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). When Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread, he shows that he's learned to trust his heavenly Father, who has allowed him to be hungry for a reason, and who will provide all that he

needs. So Jesus refuses to put his personal physical need for food ahead of obedience and trust in God. That's something which we'd all do well to remember at times, and not just in relation to our need for food or drink.

3. In the second test, Jesus refutes Satan by quoting *Do not put the Lord your God to the test* (v 7). Satan has said, in effect, "By refusing to turn stones into bread, you showed your trust in God. Now show everyone just how much you trust him. When you throw yourself down from here you won't suffer any harm, because . . . *the Scripture says, God will give orders to his angels about you; they will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones* (v 6; quoting Psalm 91:11-12). Jesus refuses to jump off the Temple, which shows that he's learned that as God's Son, he can only live in a trusting relationship with God. If we really trust someone, we don't keep on demanding that they go to extraordinary lengths to prove that they love us. The people of Israel tested the LORD: they demanded proof that he was really among them. But Jesus trusts his Father; he knows that if he serves him obediently, then he can trust his Father to take care of him - he doesn't have to test him to prove it. As I mentioned before, Satan left a very important phrase out of his quotation: after the first phrase, *God will give orders to his angels about you* – if you look at Psalm 91:11 (OT, p 594), you'll see that it adds *to protect you wherever you go*. In other words, God's promised to care for us as

we live out our normal, everyday lives. He hasn't promised to jump in to save us if we take stupid risks just to force him to act.

4. The LORD God demanded loyalty from his people. He didn't get it. Time and again they turned from him to worship the gods of the people surrounding them. Like Jesus, they were faced with the temptation to act on the basis that the end justifies the means. Unlike Jesus, they failed the test. Jesus knew that his Father had promised him the nations as his inheritance; but he also knew that before he received his inheritance, he would have to suffer many things, and be killed. Satan tempts him to take possession of his inheritance immediately. But Jesus' loyalty is to his Father, and he refuses to compromise it. He tells Satan to get lost; *the scripture says, Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him* (v 10).

CONCLUSION

So Jesus shows that he's learned the lessons which the people of Israel failed to learn. His Father now shows that Jesus was right to trust him, and sends angels to help him, to bring him food and drink, and reassurance.

There are many times when we're put to the test. Let's hold on to the lessons from this story: Firstly, Jesus himself has been there before us - he knows how we feel. Secondly, God himself is in control - he won't allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear, and when we are tested, he'll also provide a way out so that we can stand up under it. Thirdly, Scripture is a powerful weapon: *the word of God is living and active . . . sharper than any double-edged sword* (Hebrews 4:12) – so

we need to be reading and studying it regularly. And finally, Satan is testing our faith in God and our loyalty to him - let's not give him the satisfaction of seeing us fail the test!