

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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TEMPATION

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Matthew 4:1-11
Hebrews 4:14-16

We ended out reading last week by hearing what happened when Jesus was baptised. The heavens were opened to him – in other words he saw right into the presence of God and he saw God coming to him by the Spirit, and there was a voice publicly proclaiming that he was God's beloved Son and that God, God, was pleased with him. It was a decisive moment. It was when Jesus ceases to be the carpenter from the north of the country and became the Messiah, the one who would show God to his people, and to all people.

And so the first thing he did was to go away for a while. When something momentous happens; when you discover you are to be a parent or a grandparent; when you are unexpectedly successful in a job application; when you achieve a goal towards which you have been working; when you are asked to take on new responsibility, people often want to take a little while to think about thing. Some people want to savour the moment, while others want to think through what this means and what life will be like now, as things will be different.

Jesus went away into the desert, to talk over with God and to think in his own mind what this affirmation meant. Some people think of Jesus as just looking like us on the outside, but on the inside being always quite sure that he is God, and that he can do this that and the other. But if the incarnation, if God becoming a man, means anything, then I think it has to mean that Jesus did not always know it. I think of Jesus as growing up with strong inclinations to know God and to help others know God better; with strong inclinations to tell in word and deed his own radical interpretation of Scripture, which was so much bigger and deeper and all-encompassing than the ideas about God and Scripture and prophecy which were then current. And I think of him praying and wondering and doubting when and how to go about this. He would know the stories of his birth, but what did they mean and how was he to go about it? Maybe he would discuss these things with John, who faced similar challenges.

And then John takes the plunge with his own sense of call, and heads into the desert to be a radical prophet. Jesus goes to see what he is doing and realises that he should be baptised to show his intention to follow God; to show that he is not setting himself above those to whom he feels he must speak and who he must help. And he is baptised and suddenly he finds his longings and questionings confirmed and he knows that now is the time. John has begun things and he is to take them forward.

John is in the desert and Jesus goes a bit deeper into the wilderness, to be alone with God and get his thoughts organised. He does not eat for forty days, which Matthew's first readers would understand as paralleling the nation of Israel spending forty years in their

desert wanderings. Forty days. People can go that long without food but they will, as Matthew says, be hungry.

We are not a culture which has embraced fasting as part of our way of life, although there is a current vogue for the two-day per week fast as part of weight management. But other cultures and faiths have long used fasting as a way to enter into heightened experiences of prayer, or deeper patterns of thought. It is not just that you don't waste time eating and preparing food, it is that in a prolonged fast the way that the mind operates is affected. Everything can seem more significant, everything becomes an effort, and towards the end of such a long fast as Jesus undertook, it is possible for the faster to have what the normally-nourished would call hallucinations.

Jesus goes into the desert to fast and be with God, and what we are told about is not what God said, but what Satan said. It may be that Satan came to Jesus in person. It may be that in his fasting state it appeared to Jesus that Satan came to him in person. It may simply have been forceful thoughts in his head. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Jesus, who must have told this story to his disciples later, believed that in the desert he faced specific challenges from the power of evil. They came and he faced them down when he was fasting.

This is really good news! This tells us that Jesus was just like us, so, as the author to the Hebrews says, he can really understand when we are tested and tempted.

How often have you sat or knelt or stood to pray and found that your mind is wandering almost anywhere except towards God? You are not the only one. Jesus went to be with God and found that he was having to deal with the devil. He couldn't keep his mind on his purpose – or could he?

Actually he could. In fact it may be that this encounter was one of the most focussing things that could have happened to Jesus. Have you ever noticed that temptations don't come to you when you feel strong and able? Or if they do they are easy to deal with. It is when you are tired, or hungry, or sad, or worried that temptations come to us – the very times when we are most likely to excuse ourselves because “I know I lost my temper, but I wouldn't have done if I hadn't been so tired.” Or “I know that I was a bit rude, but being hungry always makes me so impatient.”

When we know the reason for our weakness, for our failing, then we might think that our failings can be excused. But they still do damage. I remember a minister Alan and I once knew well, who is dead now. His temptation, as all the congregation knew, was to lose his temper. One time I sat in my flat – I was Church Officer and had a flat above the Session room – and listened to him ranting and raving at his Session. At the end of the meeting when I went down to tidy up and close the building, his Session Clerk was remonstrating with him about his behaviour, and how it had hurt the members of the Session. “But I was angry,” he said “I was angry.” (And actually it wasn't the Session he was angry with, it was the choir.) To him his behaviour was justified because he knew the reason for it, but it still did damage.

And that is the thing about giving in to temptation: even if we excuse ourselves, we still do damage, to ourselves, making it easier to give in again next time, and to others, and to our relationship with God. Of course it is harder to do right when we feel weak for whatever reason, but that is when you are going to be tempted, not when you feel strong.

Jesus was weak when he was tempted. He was hungry, hungry in a way that none of us have ever been, I imagine. He was emotionally drained. He was trying to work things out with God. And along come these temptations: to prove what God had said – to prove that he is the Son of God, firstly to himself – God wouldn't want his Son to go hungry when there is no need, would he? - and then to others – wouldn't it be a great spectacle for him to be carried through the air from the top of the temple, by angels? And Jesus, in his weakened state, when these temptations are real possibilities to him, when he is seriously considering them, finds the way to say no. He remembers that he is about the word of God, that he is about God, not about himself.

This leads to another temptation – to be about himself. If he is about the word of God and obeying, not testing God, where is the power and the glory for himself. He is God's Son, wouldn't he like a bit of glory? The temptation to take power, and gain all that can be got from power, is one of the most fundamental human temptations. We see it writ large in the actions of some business leaders or politicians who will it seems do anything or permit anything so long as they retain their perks and position. We see it in smaller ways as well, in families, who can so easily be torn apart over vying siblings. One of the first funerals I conducted, when I was a student minister, I was so aware of that. I went to see the family and the widow was with her grown-up sons. The eldest of these men had been away for years, but now his father had died, and he had come home and was trying to take all authority for the family, which both his mother and his younger, stay-at-home brothers resented bitterly. There is power in playground politics when we are children, power in church politics, large and local, power in Community groups, and for many people power is a temptation. As it was for Jesus.

But even weak and distracted from his task, Jesus finds the way to resist and in doing so it may be that he clarifies for himself what he is to be all about. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are. He was tempted when he was weak and vulnerable. He was tempted when he was trying to be good, be holy, spend time with God as he knew he ought and needed to. He was tempted repeatedly there were other times when we see Jesus being offered variations on the same temptations, through the misunderstanding of family or disciples of what he was all about. He was tempted as we are, but without sin.

Our temptations vary in their specifics. For one person the temptation is to anger, for another it is to power, while for a third greed or lust are real issues. The good news is that the answer which Jesus found to his temptations is also the answer to ours. At the end of the day Jesus nailed his colours to the mast to be all about God, for God obeying God, worshipping God and not thinking about himself. If when we are weak, tired, ill, hungry we can still be clear that our lives are not about ourselves but about God, then we will find it easier to banish our pet temptations, even when they are at their strongest.

“Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, but without sin...so that we may receive mercy and grace to help in time of need.” The mercy is for when we fall. The grace and help is in remembering that when we are all about God, then there is freedom from temptations, which are always, in one form or another, about self.

Thanks be to God who has called us to be for him. Thanks be to God who understands and is always at our side. Amen.