

Sermon for Sunday 6th March 2022

Preacher: Rev Graham Naylor

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus in the Wilderness

So, here we are..... the first Sunday in Lent and, as we think about resisting the temptation of chocolate, biscuits, TV, or whatever else we've given up for Lent, Luke is telling us about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

At this point, it is tempting to dive into a discussion about how Jesus was in the wilderness; how we face 'wilderness' experiences; what Jesus' temptations were; how we face similar temptations (at least temptations of similar broad categories); how Jesus skilfully quoted scripture at the devil and, therefore, passed the test; how we need to do the same..... and so on.

In effect, we put ourselves in the place of Jesus! But I've got news for you..... the temptations we face are not the ones Jesus faced..... we don't have the devil come to challenge us face-to-face.....

There is often a danger of reading scripture as allegory when it isn't..... What do I mean?

Allegory, in simple terms, is the literary technique where fictional characters or events are symbolic of deeper meaning. Think about *Pilgrim's Progress*; *The Chronicles of Narnia*; or, maybe *1984*. Reading scripture as allegory, though sometimes helpful, also has difficulties. Firstly, the particular text may not be intended as an allegory and, secondly, there is the issue of who or what the fictional characters or events represent. If we make mistakes at this stage, then the meaning the allegory is intended to communicate is lost or distorted. Let's use an example: the account of David defeating Goliath –

Shepherd-boy David faces the enemy, Goliath..... an unequal fight in which David is armed with a catapult and a few stones. Yet David wins the battle; chops off Goliath's head and parades it back to Jerusalem from the battlefield. Now, beyond the straightforward reading of the account, if we look for further meaning using the account as allegory, our first question is 'Who is Goliath?'..... Or second is 'Who is David?'..... We might also ask 'Who are the armies and people of Israel?'

Goliath?

David?

Israel?

Maybe I had poor Sunday School teachers, but the standard answers would be the enemy, individual Christians, and us. So, we are encouraged to be like David, to trust in God and, despite the imbalance of the fight, to fight against the enemy..... I've got news for you..... you couldn't defeat the enemy if you tried and, more importantly, Jesus has already done it! St Paul, writing to the young church at Colossae, says that Jesus defeated the enemy (disarmed the rulers and authorities) and made a public spectacle of them (Col 2:15) and he did it through the foolishness of the cross. A seemingly imbalanced fight of good against evil in which 'good' uses the humiliation and suffering of crucifixion to defeat evil, in the way David uses a catapult against Goliath! In the story of David and Goliath, David is a 'type' of Jesus not us! It is Jesus who has defeated the enemy and made a public spectacle of them..... let's not make the mistake of putting ourselves in the place of Jesus!

What has all this got to do with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness?

This morning I want us to consider what this account tells us about Jesus as we begin Lent and head towards Easter.

The three temptations Jesus faced were the same that Israel had faced after being rescued from Egypt and they began their life as God's people: God's people had complained about the lack of food in the desert (and God provide manna for them to eat); God's people fell into idolatry (worshiping a golden calf instead of God); God's people grumbled and tested God). Or as Joel Green puts it, commenting on the account of Israel found in Deuteronomy:

Israel was allowed to hunger to learn that one does not live by bread alone (Deut 8:3)

Israel was instructed to worship the one and only God (Deut 6:4-15)

Israel was commanded not to put the Lord God to the test (Deut 6:16)

Israel failed! If Jesus, as God's faithful Son, a faithful Israelite where Israel had been unfaithful, was going to accomplish God's plan, he would have to succeed where Israel failed. This was a test to determine whether Jesus was competent for what lay ahead. If Jesus was to have a ministry of declaring that God had come to deliver his people; if Jesus was going to achieve a new *Exodus* (liberation) through his death on the cross, then he would have to pass these tests. These tests were Jesus' final exams before embarking on his ministry. Success would open the door to ministry and the mission that would lead to the cross..... failure and project *New Exodus* would have ended right there in the desert..... failure to pass the test and everything which followed would have crashed down like dominoes!

Jesus, in his withstanding of the testing in the wilderness, demonstrated his faithful obedience to God and his competency for the ministry ahead and, ultimately, his competency to go to the cross.

So, though it is true that we do face temptations which we need to resist (and there is far better comment about this in Paul's letters to the young church), let's read this account of Jesus' temptations for what it is telling us..... that Jesus faced temptation and resisted where God's people, Israel, failed and, as a result, qualified himself to continue the ministry that would ultimately lead to his death and, through it, victory over the enemy..... and so we can live in the light of that victory.

Amen