

A Testing Experience

Sermon for St Pauls: 11th February 2007 based on Luke 4:1-13

I have some trivial questions for you this morning:

<Read a few from the Trivial Pursuit Box>

There is a show on Australian television called "Temptation". Once upon a time it was called "The Great Temptation" and then, for a while, it was called "Sale of the Century". And then, a couple of years back it returned as "Temptation."

I suppose one or two of you here watch Home and Away or the ABC News at 7 o'clock on weekdays, or you might not watch TV at all, like you might actually have a life, so let me quickly explain what happens on "Temptation."

There is a host who smiles a lot, is always happy and can read out questions without making mistakes.

There is a co-host, who is **not** called a hostess.

And there are three contestants who have to answer Trivial Pursuit type questions of increasing obscurity. They lose points if they get a wrong answer, and gain points if they get a right answer.

I say *points*. On Temptation they are called dollars although any relationship to any known currency is hard to see.

The contestant who is leading at key moments is permitted to exchange some their points for various essential household items like a Lalique vase which resembles a volcanic lava flow, or his and hers Rado watches valued at about the price of a medium sized house.

Thus for just a few points, or dollars, you can buy a fortune. It seems a tempting proposition.

In the end the contestant with the most points, or dollars if you must, is declared the winner. And if they win they can take away the grand piano, or the home theatre entertainment centre complete with Dolby Trans-Logic Modifiers and speakers that look like coat-stands. Unless...

You see they only win these bigger prizes if they come back tomorrow, and win again.

Now, I have a philosophical question. Why is the program called "Temptation"?

I guess there is one obvious answer, and it is half right.

The obvious answer is that the contestants are tempted to exchange their points for prizes. But, I think that is only half right. I think the real temptation is that the program tempts the winning contestant into believing they can win. And that they can win again tomorrow. It is the temptation to pride or, I suppose more correctly, the temptation towards hubris. Hubris is an excessive belief in one's own ability, hubris is over-the-top self-confidence.

When the show "Temptation" gets to its final act, the contestant faces a test. The test is a temptation to hubris, a temptation to excessive self-confidence. "If I come back tomorrow, can I win again?"

If you have watched this show, you will know that most winning contestants fail the test. They mostly succumb to the temptation of unmerited self-belief. They come back tomorrow. And are never heard from again.

And occasionally, a winning contestant will surprise us by taking the prizes and leaving the show. Such acts of self-awareness and sober self-assessment are rare indeed. Surprising,

when a contestant is tested by the temptation, and actually passes the test. They say NO to the temptation to continue, take the prizes and go home. They have been tested by temptation, and they have passed the test.

And so we come to the temptations of Jesus. And the first thing we should note is that the word the Bible uses for “temptation” also means “test.”

We tend to think of temptation only in a negative sense. We think being tempted is a bad thing. This is not the way the Bible talks about it at all. Temptation is not sin, Temptation is testing. The question with temptation is not whether we are tempted or not, it is whether we pass the test of temptation. The approach to temptation is not that we should avoid being tempted, but that we should accept temptation as a normal part of life to which we have a responsibility to respond. We can't avoid temptation, but we can take control of how we respond to it.

The word the Bible uses for “temptation” appears 34 times in the Greek New Testament. I have a computer that does these calculations for me.

In the New International Version of the Bible, that we most commonly read from here at St Pauls, the word is translated 13 times as “temptation” or “tempted”. But 15 times it is translated as “tested”.

For example, in Matthew 16:1 “The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and **tested** him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.” One can hardly say the Pharisees “tempt” Jesus in the way we usually think of temptation in English.

Three times, the word is translated as “trap”. In Matthew 22:18 where Jesus, knowing the evil intent of the Pharisees, says, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to **trap** me?"

And on three other occasions, the word is translated, not as “tempt” but as “try”.

So what we have here in the temptations of Jesus, is a testing experience. Jesus is on trial. He is tempted, for sure. But the focus is not on the temptations, but on whether Jesus will pass the test.

Let's remind ourselves of what happens to Jesus.

First of all, this story appears in each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. And in each case, it is located in time right after Jesus is baptised. Right after the very start of Jesus' public ministry. He starts his work and immediately he goes on Retreat.

He comes away from the baptism experience, an experience in which he hears God speak directly to him. He is, according to verse 1, “full of the Holy Spirit.” He is on a high. He's just had a mountain-top experience in which God spoke to him. Heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, but I guess his heart was racing, his adrenalin levels were at max, he would feel ready for anything. Most of us would be wanting to get started right away. But Jesus does something different. He goes on retreat. He leaves everybody for 40 days and walks out into the wilderness. To think. To pray. To contemplate what it all means. And to examine himself, to test himself, to see if he's up to the task.

Well, I say he tests himself, but the Bible says that the Devil comes along and tests him with three temptations.

First, the Devil suggests Jesus use his supernatural powers to satisfy his hunger by turning the stones into bread.

Second, he takes Jesus up a high mountain and offers Jesus the power to rule all the kingdoms of the world. All Jesus has to do is worship the devil.

And third, the Devil takes Jesus up to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and suggests he demonstrate his supernatural powers by jumping off, and landing unhurt.

Two things strike me about the context of the story. The first is that Jesus must have told this story to others. No-one else was around. This happened when Jesus was alone. And he must have told this story to his followers so that they would know that he also knew what it was like to be tempted and tested.

The second is that it is clear that this is an internal struggle that is going on. I don't think we are take some of the elements of the story too literally. I know some people get all tangled up trying to convince themselves that a man could survive 40 days in the desert without food.

Of course it's possible. A man can live 40 days without food, 3 days without water, 8 minutes without air, and one second without hope.

But whether it is possible or not, I think we are intended to see this as a spiritual struggle through which Jesus travels. The physical details are not so important. I mean, in the second temptation the devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain from which he showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment. Which mountain is that? A mountain on the moon? No, wait a minute, that would only allow us to see one side of the earth. Couldn't see all the kingdoms of the world in a moment from there. And in fact the kingdoms would be too small to see from up there anyway. Despite the myth, from the moon you can't even see the Great Wall of Nasi Goreng.

And I suppose one has to say too that the question is not whether the Devil is a real person or not. Personally, I don't even care for the debate about whether we are supposed to think of the Devil as an actual being, or not.

But I do know that the Devil does get blamed for a lot of stuff that really isn't his fault.

We do need to admit that we fail the test of temptation if we blame the Devil rather than taking responsibility ourselves.

The 17 stone woman who reaches for her 12th Tim Tam and then licks the chocolate from chubby fingers and says "Oh, the Devil made me eat it."

Or, to maintain gender balance, the guy with a beer gut so well developed he hasn't seen his shoes since 1975, who says he'll just have one more tinny for the road, and when caught by the Booze Bus declaims, "I couldn't help it, it was that Devil alcohol. The Devil made me do it."

The simple truth is that the Devil doesn't make us do it. The truth is we were tested with temptation, and we failed the test. All by ourselves.

So Jesus is tempted and tested by the Devil, or maybe by his own internal struggle about how to go about his ministry. He has a vision for his life's work. He has some undoubted gifts. What is the best way to use these gifts in order to achieve his vision? And since Jesus did not have a management consultant to help him answer his corporate vision questions, he went off on a personal private retreat to struggle with the problems.

One commentator has described this problem as "the problem of what to do with supernatural powers." Clark Kent and Peter Parker faced similar problems with less success.

So what are the three temptations.

The first is to turn stones into bread. Jesus is hungry. I think the Greek word is *famished* actually. And one might suppose that after 40 days without food you might feel a bit like a roast dinner. But actually not.

Who's been on the 40 Hour Famine?

The hardest meals to miss during the 40 Hour Famine are not the *last* meals. It's those meals on the *first* day. By the time you get through to Sunday lunch time, you've got over feeling hungry. At the end of the 40 Hour Famine, the last thing you want is a big meal. A little meal, perhaps, but not more.

So after a few weeks of fasting, your body will be weak, but hunger won't be a very powerful force within you.

So this first temptation is not really about dealing with world hunger, as much as World Vision might want you to believe it. This first temptation is about whether one should use one's gifts for purely personal ends.

Just because Jesus CAN turn stones into bread to satisfy his own needs, does not mean he SHOULD. Because the next step from here is how Jesus will act in his ministry.

He could attract men and women to his cause by using his supernatural gifts to meet their needs. Need a meal? Hey presto, instant MacDonalds. Want better clothes? Abracadabra, here's a Zenga suit for you, and a Prada for the missus.

That would cause people to follow Jesus. And it would not have been too hard for Jesus to provide justification for doing it this way. After all, didn't God provide manna in the desert for hungry Hebrews? So turning stones into bread, as a way of encouraging people to follow you, is not without good precedents.

But Jesus stands as the fulfilment of God's revelation. God wanted Jesus to lead us into lives of giving, not getting. And he wanted us not to put band-aids over problems, but to look into our own hearts for the causes.

There's nothing wrong with feeding the hungry, but the true Christian does not stop there. Jesus rejects the quick fix. He's interested in why people are hungry. And he sends the Devil packing.

And I love the way he does it.

Can you complete the next line of this song?

"You ain't nothing but a Hound Dog ..."

What about a hymn?

"All Things Bright and Beautiful..."

What about a present day hit song from the group Muse?

"Don't waste your time ... " (or time will waste you).

And what about a scripture verse from Deuteronomy 8:3

"Man shall not live by bread alone ... " (but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord).

As Biblical scholarship has improved since the days of the King James version of the Bible, we have realised that Jesus does not recite the whole verse to the Devil.

He just says "Man shall not live by bread alone" and leaves it to the Devil to recall the rest.

Not only does Jesus know his Bible, but you can bet the Devil knows it too.

So the first temptation ends with Jesus passing the test. He decides that he will not induce people to follow him with bribery. Philip Yancey says he is impressed with Jesus' restraint. While "Satan has the power to coerce, to dazzle, to force obedience, to destroy ... God's power, in contrast, is internal and non-coercive. I never sense Jesus twisting a person's arm."

Then we come to the second temptation.

By the way, the actual temptations are only recorded in Matthew and Luke. Mark passes over all these details. And Matthew and Luke put the temptations in a different order. If that means something, I don't care.

The second temptation is the one where the Devil takes Jesus up on a high mountain where he has some sort of amazing DVD player that shows you all the kingdoms of the earth in a flash.

And he offers to give Jesus authority and position over them all, if Jesus will just engage in a wee bit of Devil worship.

Maybe Matthew is right to put this one last, because it is perhaps the most subtle and reasonable temptation of them all. It's the temptation to do a deal with the Devil. It's the temptation to compromise. To compromise with the world. To come to terms with the world, and play within the world's rules.

How many times have we heard of Christians who say they want to change the world from the inside. Work within the system. I think we all do it, more or less, frankly. We are all trapped into compromises with the world that I'm sure God looks at with sadness and regret. We accept the evil in the world, and instead of standing against it, we work to minimise its impact. Yes, there is hunger in the world, let's feed the hungry people, instead of recognising that the solution to world hunger lies in the political will to do something about it. Maybe that's part of being human.

Judy and I watched Al Gore's doco "An Inconvenient Truth" last week. It made me realise just how much we have made compromises on issues of protecting the planet. In a way, we have made compromises with the Devil. Big cars and so many of them. For Heaven's sake there are three adults in our house and three cars. And mine has an engine big enough to power Cambodia. And I like it. And do I really want to drive one of those electric hybrid things with their slow acceleration and girly styling? *Nah*, the Devil says, *Philip you're a man. Men drive V8s.* And maybe I've failed the test.

Well, I don't know if Jesus would drive a hybrid, or whether he would drive anything at all, but we can see how he deals with this temptation. The Christian way of life will not stoop to the world's level: instead we must lift the world up to the level of God's standards. Jesus says, "No compromise! Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."

And then the third temptation is a temptation to the way of sensationalism. And Jesus rejects that too.

The Devil takes him to the highest point of the temple and suggests he should throw himself down. God will not allow him to be harmed, and everyone will see that Jesus is super-human.

I mean, if you saw that, you'd be inclined to follow such a person wouldn't you? I would. Or at least, I would be tempted to follow such a person.

But the problem is that such discipleship would not be based on faith, but on doubt.

If our faith is based on signs and wonders, is it faith at all? This is not faith. This is doubt, looking for proof.

Now it's OK to doubt. Doubt leads us into all kinds of revelation, discovery and growth.

But our belief in God, and our belief in the merits of his Son as our Lord is based on faith.

Over the years I have heard many wonderful stories about miraculous events. Indeed, I've had one or two happen to me.

I have one friend who did not have a church upbringing and whose life was in a seriously bad way. He was depressed and seriously wondering what future he had. He was driving across the Sydney Harbour Bridge one night in a foul and distressed mood. When suddenly the

whole inside of the car was filled with light, and he recognised that he was in the very presence of Jesus. Although he had hardly known a thing about Jesus before this event.

When he told me this story, my first reaction was envy. Oh, to have a divine visitation of such clarity.

Sometimes, like the commentator, Philip Yancey, I wish that God used a heavier touch on me. This is how Philip Yancey puts it, “At times I want God to overwhelm me, to overcome my doubts with certainty, to give final proofs of his existence and his concern.”

“I want quick and spectacular answers to my prayers.

Healing for my diseases

Protection and safety for my loved ones.

I want a God without ambiguity,

One to whom I can point for the sake of my doubting friends.”

But these are the very temptations the Devil was putting to Jesus. Instead, Jesus settles for a slower, gentler way. Jesus resists the shortcut solutions to human needs. He does not compel the world to accept the cause of justice. He does not trade away his own freedoms for the guarantee of security. He shows a stunning degree of restraint. Divine restraint.

There is an old hymn that goes like this:

Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin

Each victory will help you some other to win;

Fight manfully onwards; dark passions subdue;

Look ever to Jesus—he will carry you through.

Jesus was tempted and passed the test. And that is our great encouragement. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it this way:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

A-men