

First Sunday of Lent, Year C

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

Psalm 90

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13

When looking at the temptations of Christ, we preachers often rush to find lessons from these accounts that we can apply to our own struggles with temptation. And this is indeed appropriate, just as it is appropriate—for example—to draw lessons from Christ's Passion that we can apply to our own carrying of the various crosses in our lives.

However, it seems to me that we should avoid rushing too quickly to this stage. The comparison with Christ's Passion is apt, because it is reasonably clear to us that—in this instance—Christ carried a cross and endured a kind of *existential suffering* that is far greater than anything we will ever have to face.

He was not simply giving us an example to follow, even though he was doing that too. No, first of all, Christ on the cross was winning the ultimate battle over sin on behalf of all mankind. This was a one-off event, the shockwaves from which still reverberate throughout the universe in glorious splendour.

As such, it is appropriate for our primary response to the Passion and death of Our Lord to be one of humble and awestruck worship – to get on our knees with gratitude for such a total—and totally unearned—gift. To the degree that we can apply lessons from this one-off event to our own lives, that is secondary.

I think we should approach Christ's temptations in the desert in a similar way. In his dramatic showdown with the evil one, Christ endured the kind of existential temptation that we will thankfully never have to face. As a prelude to his Passion and death, Christ overcame such temptation on behalf of all mankind – again, as a completely unearned gift to us.

So before we turn to see what lessons we can draw from this for ourselves, let us take a few moments to appreciate exactly what Jesus achieved in this event.

Following his baptism, and led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus spent forty days fasting in the desert in preparation for his ministry. As you would know, this period of forty days recalls various periods of preparation in the Old Testament, including the forty days Moses spent fasting and with God on Mount Zion at the giving of the Law (Ex. 34:28), the forty days the Israelites spent spying out the Promised Land (Num. 13:25), and the forty years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land (Num. 14:34). Our season of Lent is likewise a forty-day period of preparation, echoing these historic precedents.

During this time of prayer and fasting, Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Now, we might want to ask here: how could Jesus—the All-Holy Son of God—be tempted? What is actually going on here?

Well, in the original Greek, the word that we translate as “temptation” (peirazo) is actually closer in meaning to “an attempt”, “to try”. In other words, the devil tries to get Jesus to sin – and fails. The Catechism notes that Satan’s efforts here are an attempt to get Jesus to “compromise his filial attitude towards God”, to cease to respect the Father as a father.

Crucially, in rebuffing these attacks, Jesus accomplishes that which was not accomplished by either Adam in Paradise or Israel in the desert. Both Adam and the people of Israel lost trust in God, and elected to try to usurp his place in their lives. So here already we see the obedience and faithfulness of Jesus making up for the disobedience and faithlessness of Adam and his descendants – a task which would be fulfilled in full on the Cross.

But before we continue with these big-picture observations, let’s have a quick look at the three temptations themselves. It’s worth noting here that each time that Jesus responds to the devil, he does so by quoting from Deuteronomy, which was the final presentation of the Law that Moses gave the Israelites before their entry into the Promised Land. He therefore adheres to and fulfils the Law that Israel constantly broke.

The first trial is occasioned by the fact Jesus has been fasting for forty days, and so he is hungry. The devil invites him to violate the fast by using his powers as the Son of God to turn a stone into bread. This echoes Adam eating the forbidden fruit and Israel's complaint against Moses for depriving them of the bread they had in Egypt by leading them into the wilderness. In rebuffing the devil, Jesus repeats Moses' rebuke to the Israelites' complaint: “Man does not live on bread alone” (Deut. 8:3).

In the second trial (in St Luke’s order of presentation), the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he will worship him. This reflects the influence that the devil had in the world order of the time, but which he would lose through Jesus' actions (Rev 11:15). Importantly, by framing it this way, the devil is encouraging Jesus to play into the false, political understanding of the Messiah's role that was popular at the time, which Jesus would himself reject (John 18:36) – namely, that he was to be essentially a worldly ruler and military leader. Most of Jesus’ contemporaries wanted a Messiah who would seize political power, kick out the occupying Romans, and usher in an age of prosperity and plenty. But here we see Jesus voluntarily undergoing hunger and refusing political power, revealing that he is to be a very different kind of Messiah!

This temptation also echoes the temptation to false worship that the Israelites had in the desert, such as in the incident of the Golden Calf (Ex 32:4). Jesus rebuffs the devil

by quoting the fundamental requirement of Israelite worship in Deuteronomy: ‘You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone.’

In the third trial (in Luke’s order), the devil tries to get Jesus to put God to the test. What’s fascinating here is that the devil’s tactic is to quote Scripture – specifically, an excerpt from psalm 91. It’s been said that the perversion of the best thing is the worst thing – and here Satan tries to subtly invert the original meaning of the psalm, which says that those who trust in God will receive his protection. It does not say that people should take reckless risks or insist on miracles on demand to test whether God will keep his word. That is fundamentally an attitude of dis-trust. Jesus recognises this, and quotes back to him Deuteronomy 6:16, in which Moses rebuked the Israelites for having put God to the test in the wilderness.

So, what does this fascinating and mysterious event reveal to us about who Jesus is? As the Gospels would themselves make clear, Jesus is the *new Adam* who remained faithful just where the first Adam had given in to temptation. Jesus also perfectly fulfils the call of Israel. In contrast to those who had once provoked God during forty years in the desert, Christ reveals himself as God's servant, totally obedient to the divine will. In this, Jesus is the devil's conqueror, and his victory over the tempter in the desert anticipates his final victory at the Passion, which was the supreme act of obedience and love for the Father.

Okay. Having established all that, let’s finish up with a quick look at how Jesus’ temptations might relate to our own. As I’ve already mentioned, his differ from ours at an existential level, and his obedience to the Father far surpasses anything that we will have to do. In this way, as the Letter to the Hebrews would say, we have a High Priest who has been tempted in every way that we are, and who knows our struggles from the inside. Therefore, we can always turn to Jesus in our struggles with temptation, and ask him to carry our burden for us if it too much for us to carry.

Jesus’ temptations also speak to us about what truly matters in life, and our fundamental identity. Note that the devil begins each trial with the words, “*If you are the Son of God*” – the devil is trying to sow doubt on Christ’s identity as the Son of God. Well, he does the same with us, tempting us to doubt our royal dignity as adopted sons and daughters of the Father Most High. And indeed, how often do we settle for mere scraps, when we have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb?

At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside, because we perceive him as secondary—or even superfluous and annoying—in comparison with all the seemingly far more urgent matters that fill our lives. Even people of sincere faith can be tempted to construct our own little world on our own foundation, without reference to God – focusing entirely on passing political and material things, whilst setting God aside as unnecessary.

And so we are given this season of Lent – a forty day period of spiritual training. Pope Benedict XVI once spoke of Lent as a kind of long retreat, in which we regroup ourselves in God so as to be able to overcome the temptations of the Evil One and to find the truth of our existence. Armed with the tools of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we humbly allow God to resume his rightful place as Lord of our life. In this way, we shall be prepared to celebrate the Easter festival in truth, when we will renew once more our baptismal promises, and rejoice in our calling as children of the Most High God.