

Keeping Lent with Saint Luke:

The Temptation of Jesus

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As we begin our Lenten journey and think about the challenges that we will face during this season, Jack Mahoney encourages us to contemplate the very human challenges that Jesus himself faced during the forty days after his baptism. The temptations with which the devil taunted Jesus, as recounted by St Luke, represented the questions he would have to consider as he prepared for his ministry – how did Jesus respond to them, both in the desert and throughout his ministry?

When Jesus decided to leave his home and family in Nazareth and become a travelling preacher, he began by going to John the Baptist to be baptised by him in the River Jordan and to identify himself with his people as they confessed their sins (Lk 3:7). St Luke tells us that as Jesus was praying after being baptised, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came and rested on him in the form of a dove, while a heavenly voice proclaimed: 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Lk 3:21-22). Following this recognition and commendation by his heavenly Father, Jesus was full of the Spirit of God and he 'was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil' (Lk 4:1-2). This biblical account of the temptation of Jesus as described in Luke's Gospel has been chosen by the Church as the gospel for the Mass of the First Sunday of Lent. It should put us in the right mind to approach Lent as a time for reflection, penance and prayer in preparation for Easter, as described in a [previous article](#).

The idea of Jesus being tempted shows us how very human Our Lord was, and that it is perfectly human to be tempted, as he was. The basic idea, of course, is not that of being incited or encouraged to commit sin,



but that of being 'put to the test' – which is the original meaning of the Greek word *peirazo* – and being given the opportunity to choose well and please God. Some commentators see the gospel description of Jesus being 'tested' and overcoming the devil's temptations as a contrast with the testing of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a test that they failed (Gen 3). However, the temptation of Jesus was more reminiscent of the tradition that for forty years

the people of Israel, having been liberated from Egypt, were being put to the test in the Sinai desert, and continually failed God who was trying to form them into his own people before giving them the promised land. Now Jesus was representing his people and in his turn facing up to the challenges and the tests that the devil was putting before him, as he prepared to begin his mission to bring the God of Israel afresh to his people and to bring that people back to God.

Planning the ministry

Looked at in more human terms, the period spent by Jesus in the wilderness after his approval by his Father can be seen as his time to plan his ministry and pray for guidance about the campaign that he was preparing to undertake as a travelling prophet and

preacher. We know from Luke's Gospel that Jesus regularly withdrew to a quiet place to pray for support and guidance from his heavenly father (e.g. Lk 5:16; 6:12), particularly at the beginning of his ministry while he considered the options facing him and the steps to be planned. What was going to be his main purpose in his work? To convince his hearers of God's love for them and of how God was about to assert his kingly presence and power in Israel, and eventually throughout the world? Jesus was to describe this overarching aim as the coming of the kingdom, or the kingship, of God.

How was Jesus going to frame this message and communicate it effectively to his hearers? Was he going to threaten fire and brimstone, as the Baptist seemed to prefer (Lk 3:7-9), or was he going to adopt an on the whole gentler and less ascetical approach; an approach aimed at removing oppression and injustice, and accepting sinners and social misfits, which Luke tells us John seemed to find puzzling, if not contradictory (Lk 7:18-23)? In the Sermon on the Plain (6:17-49) later addressed by Jesus to his disciples, which was based on an earlier version of Jesus's teaching and which provided Luke's equivalent to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), Jesus is depicted as primarily encouraging the poor, the hungry and those people persecuted in his name to rejoice at being favoured by God, while by contrast warning those who are satisfied at being rich and comfortable and well thought of that they faced a very different future. However, Jesus chose to teach mainly through parables: brief stories or vignettes about everyday life with a religious or moral application, which would close by presenting his hearers with a discomfiting challenge about how they should react in such circumstances. In three weeks time we shall consider the famous Lucan parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), which the Church has chosen for our Lenten reflection and prayer in the Mass of the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

In addition, as Luke shows us, Jesus decided that he would use his powers of healing and miracle working in order to manifest that God's kingdom was not just about to come, but that it had already arrived in the presence and transforming words and actions of Jesus himself. As he was to point out: 'In fact, the kingdom of God is among you' (17:21). His God-given gifts were for the benefit of others, to meet their spiritual

needs and bring about the kingdom of God; they were certainly not to be used for Jesus's own convenience, for example to produce bread in the wilderness to satisfy the pangs of hunger brought on by his fasting, which Luke has the devil suggest to Jesus as his first temptation (4:3-4). Was this man really a 'son of God' as that voice had proclaimed from heaven? If he was, as the devil wanted to find out, why should he have to suffer from hunger in the wilderness when he could easily turn stones into loaves? After all, God miraculously provided bread for the Israelites in the desert (Ex 16:3-4, 15). As Jesus accepted this first testing, almost perhaps as a distraction from thinking about and planning his mission, Luke tells us that he countered it by quoting Moses' comment on that manna in the desert (Dt 8:3), that there is more to life than bread: 'One does not live by bread alone' (Lk 4:4). The Gospel of John spells out for us that, for Jesus, 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (Jn 4:34).

Another major strategic issue that Jesus would have had to consider was that of towards whom he should direct his mission to bring about the kingdom of God. Should he, for instance, try to work through the religious and civil authorities, by aiming to convert the powerful and woo the Jewish and Roman establishment in ways which have tempted the Church through the centuries, and thus through 'the powers that be' seek to influence and programme the masses of ordinary folk? This option sounds quite like the second temptation that Luke has the devil put to Jesus: showing him 'all the kingdoms of the world' and offering to give Jesus complete power over them, provided he first worship the devil, who claimed to own them all (4:5-7). It was not true, of course, that the devil had really been given authority over the world's earthly kingdoms as he claimed – we are reminded in John 8:44 that he is 'a liar and the father of lies' – but this offering of what we have become accustomed to know as a Faustian bargain of selling one's soul to the devil in return for enormous benefits was countered by Jesus, again by quoting the word of God: that one should 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' (4:8). In fact, the strategic decision made by Jesus was to take up the traditional role of the prophet in Israel (7:17; 24:19) and to act as a conscience towards those who had authority and power over others, rather than to identify or ally himself with them. He adopted a similar approach in

the way in which he spoke to the great crowds he would attract, by respecting every one of God's people, and addressing each member of his audiences directly in their own right and their inalienable dignity, rather than trying to manipulate them and secure their allegiance indirectly.

Next, who would be in these crowds whom Jesus would be addressing? Would he address everyone indiscriminately, including gentiles, or should he concentrate on the people of Israel, or even restrict himself to the people of his native Galilee? Jesus's eventual aim, as we learn later in Luke, was that 'people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God' (13:29); Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, was devoted to describing the spread of the Church among Jews and Gentiles alike around the Mediterranean. At first, however, Jesus seems to have decided to concentrate on the Jews, addressing them in their villages and synagogues (4:44), and not to directly focus on gentiles, including Romans, although he seemed prepared to make exceptions, as with his healing of the centurion's servant in Capernaum (7:1-10). After all, his first aim was to save and renew the people of Israel, as he proclaimed at his final supper with his followers before his death, by instituting a 'new covenant' between them and God (22:20). Then the universalist destiny of the new Israel could be allowed to take its course under the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit, as Luke set out to chronicle in the subsequent Acts of the Apostles.

Attracting a following

Jesus no doubt saw, or at least hoped, that inevitably in the various places which he planned to visit he would attract crowds of followers and supporters, men and women welcoming his teaching which would differ so much from the disdain and burdens they were subject to from their current religious leaders. He would have known that some people would be more sympathetic to his message than others; would he call some of these closer into his company and even invite a few to share his mission to 'proclaim the kingdom of God' (9:2)? Reading the gospel accounts of Jesus's calling of the twelve apostles to join him, as described in Lk 5:10-11 and even more tersely in Luke's source, Mark 1:16-20, one can easily get the

impression that this was done without any preparation on his part and completely out of the blue. However, it seems in Luke that Jesus already knew Simon at least, since on an earlier occasion Jesus visited Simon's house and cured his mother-in-law of fever (4:38-39). It appears to have been only later according to Luke that Jesus selected twelve men from his larger band of disciples to become his 'apostles' (from the Greek 'sent out', 6:13), settling on the number twelve to indicate that the close inner circle among his disciples will be a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel and will come to exercise a leadership of service (22:26-7) in the new Israel which Jesus announced he was setting up (22:28-30). The implication seems to be that Jesus already knew these men as disciples, and that he had reason after spending a night in prayer (6:12-13) for choosing and inviting each one of them to join his inner band, perhaps because they had earlier shown themselves to be particularly receptive to his message. Not that the Twelve were a particularly impressive lot, at least before they received the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost (Lk 24:49). Later in the Gospel, Jesus would teach them (11:4) to pray that they would not be brought into temptation – in fact, Lk 22:3 tells us that Satan was successful in winning over Judas – and Jesus had occasion to explain to Simon Peter that Satan had demanded to sift, or scatter, all of his apostles like wheat, but that Jesus had prayed for them that they would recover (22:31). It was on such an occasion as this that Jesus could have explained to his intimate companions how he too had been tempted by the devil from time to time, including during his early days of planning and prayer in the desert.

Among the many disciples who would be attracted to follow Jesus, we also read in Lk 8:1-3 that as he campaigned through the cities and villages he was accompanied by 'some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities' and by 'many other' women. Luke also tells us that the latter 'provided for them out of their resources' (8:3), so that would resolve another question which Jesus may have felt it necessary to consider in his planning: if he did gather a band of regular companions to accompany him, where would the resources come from to feed and accommodate and look after them all in their journeyings? (The Gospel of John, 13:29, informs us that Judas would be the treasurer of 'the common purse').

Meeting opposition

As he planned his mission, Jesus must have been well aware that he was going to meet with opposition from hostile individuals and with all sorts of vested interests in Israel, and that he would experience disappointment, disapproval, frustration and ultimately rejection. Nothing less, in fact, could be expected for a true prophet such as Jesus planned to be, and of this he was well aware. Having some sense of his future calling, Jesus would have studied keenly the history of his people, and would have been knowledgeable in the traditions concerning the Law and the prophets, recalling that bright young lad who had so impressed his teachers in the Bible classes in the temple in Jerusalem many years ago (2:46-7). So he would know also, as Luke has him observe, that 'it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem' (13:33), which accounts for the whole second half of Luke's Gospel being centred on Jesus's great journey to Jerusalem in the expectation of being put to death there (9:51-3; 18:31-33).

To counter such foreboding for the future perhaps what was wanted was a really spectacular event that the people and authorities of Israel simply could not ignore, one which would establish Jesus's identity as the undeniable Son of God – something like appearing on the lofty pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem at a major feast in the sight of all the crowds and casting himself down dramatically into the courtyard, secure in being safely protected by his loving Father. After all, the Jews were going to be demanding regularly that this claimed Messiah produce a convincing sign of his genuineness (11:16), as indeed the devil now proposed in the third of Luke's temptations (4:9-11): if God really was his father, let Jesus throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, confident in the protection of God's angels to 'bear him up' safely, as proclaimed in Ps 91:11.

Evidently, the devil had now learned to quote Scripture to his purpose, but he was no more successful than in the previous two temptations recorded. Luke chose an order different from that of Matthew 4:5-7 to make this the third and culminating temptation, centring on Jerusalem, the nation's capital, which would be the focus and climax of Jesus's whole earthly ministry to Israel (9:51-53). But faced with this final, and almost puerile fantasy, Jesus's only

dismissive reply (4:12) was that it was again like Israel in the desert (Ex 17:2), simply tempting God. As he observed, 'Again, it is written (Dt 6:16), Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Now what?

Trying, as I have been doing, to explore the human thinking of Jesus in this passage of Luke's Gospel is to put oneself diffidently face to face with the profound mystery of the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), God in human form. But it is a genuine human form, and not a facade or a docetist make-believe, and so we are called on to respect the very humanity of Jesus while attempting to understand and appreciate it, and to learn from it. Luke ends his account of the temptation of Jesus by remarking that 'when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time' (4:13). This could imply that Luke has described only three of a possibly greater number of proposals with which the devil was testing Jesus, then and later; and there would surely have been many other options which would occur to Jesus as he explored and assessed various ways of proceeding, either accepting or rejecting them as he planned and anticipated his divine mission. The gospel shows that Satan would return to plague Jesus and that he would suffer doubts and perplexities in the months ahead, culminating in the distressing scene in the garden when, echoing his earlier words to Peter (22:31-2), he twice exhorted his closest friends to pray that they would not be tempted (22:40, 46), and when he himself agonised in prayer to his Father over what he feared was about to happen to him (22:41-44).

After ending his description of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness as he planned his ministry, Luke reports his return to Galilee 'filled with the power of the Spirit' (4:14). He provides a powerful scene showing Jesus in action on the Sabbath in the synagogue in Nazareth where he had been brought up, in what we are probably meant to understand as a typical instance of the preaching programme on which Jesus had now embarked. He stood up to read, possibly invited as a returning member of the congregation, and he was handed the scroll of Isaiah. Whether he then chose a particular passage or it just so happened that this was passed to him, it could not have been a better or a more appropriate set of verses to sum up his work and his role in his Father's plan,

describing as it did, in the words of the great consoling prophet of Israel, Isaiah (Is 61:1-2), how the Spirit of the Lord anointed the prophet to bring good news to the poor, to free those in bondage, to restore sight, to liberate, and 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (4:16-19). Ending his reading, Jesus sat down in the expectant silence, and began his sermon by announcing confidently: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (4:20-21). He was now firmly on his way.

As we now on our part think and pray about this striking passage from Saint Luke given to us as the Gospel at Mass on the First Sunday of Lent, we can appreciate how appropriate it is for the start of this liturgical season. It is inviting us to consider how we shall choose to behave in the next six weeks as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the resurrection of Our Lord, by reflecting on what 'testings', that is, what opportunities may occur to us or may come our way. The first and most obvious test will be whether to ignore Lent or to decide to do something about it,

either by 'giving something up' for Lent or 'taking something on'. This is a time in our religious life particularly suited to listening to the observation of Our Lord first given in St Mark's Gospel, that 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mk 8:34), to which Luke added significantly the qualification, 'let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me' (9:23). In my previous article, I noted that radical self-denial is not to deny oneself some 'thing', but to deny, or negate, one's *self* as the centre of our lives and preoccupations, as Jesus here invites all his disciples to do. We can follow Jesus in asking for the power of the Spirit to operate in our lives too, and help us make the right choices.

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