

Put to the test

(Matthew 3:13-4:11)

This morning I invite you to explore with me the baptism of Jesus. What does it signify about him? And what can we learn from the ordeal he underwent straight afterwards? How can this help us in dealing with our own ordeals?

So firstly: ***What is the significance of Jesus's baptism?***

As we heard in our first reading from Matthew's Gospel, the baptism of Jesus dramatically climaxes in the Holy Spirit **descending** on him **like a dove and coming to rest on him**, and **a voice from heaven** declaring **'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'** (Matt. 3:16-17)

If you are very, very familiar with those words from heaven, you might lose the sense of just how dramatic their impact would have been on the crowd being baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist.

Among that crowd, Matthew previously tells us, were **many of the Pharisees and Sadducees** who had come to see what all the fuss was about. (3:7) Now those two groups knew the Old Testament scriptures like the back of their hands. They would, or should have known that this divine statement from heaven was actually two statements. The first, declaring Jesus to be God's **beloved Son**, is taken straight from the 2nd Psalm. (Ps. 2:7) That's a Psalm which every religious Jew knew was about God's chosen one... the Messiah... the Christ, the mighty King who was to come. And the second statement, **with whom I am well pleased**, is a quote from the 42nd chapter of the prophet Isaiah (42:1). It's a description of the *Suffering Servant of the LORD*, a description climaxing in Isaiah chapter 53 where Isaiah declares that this servant so beloved of God will be **wounded for our transgressions,... crushed for our iniquities**, whose **chastisement brings us peace**, so that **by his stripes we are healed**. (Isa. 53:5)

All of this should have been apparent to the learned Pharisees and Sadducees watching the baptism of this man Jesus from Nazareth.

The two certainties that God reveals here about Jesus are that ***he is the Chosen One of God***, but that the way in front of him is ***the way of the Cross***.

Jesus himself would have known at this moment, if not before, that he was destined to be the ultimate conqueror, but that his conquest must have as its only weapon, the power of suffering love.

His baptism was, in effect, God's visual and audible ordination of Jesus as the future King of kings and the Great High Priest of each and every soul that would come to trust in him.

This, then, is the context for what happens next in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

No sooner has Jesus's true identity and his earthly mission been publicly revealed to those who had ears to hear at his baptism, than his trial begins.

Here's what Matthew tells us:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (4:1)

So notice this: Jesus's ordeal is under God's sovereign control and will. This is not something outside of God's power. He is led by the Holy Spirit to the place and the circumstances of his trial of temptation. It is therefore something that serves God's purposes.

The same goes for us and our temptations. We need to see them for what they are – they are the means of testing us. In fact, this word that the English bibles have translated as *temptation*, is better understood as *testing*. That's its basic meaning.

What we call temptation is not meant by God to make us sin. It is meant to enable us to conquer sin. It is not meant to make us bad. It is meant to make us more Christ-like. It is not meant to weaken us.

It is meant to *temper* us, that we might emerge stronger. Let's pause here for a moment.

In this context, the Oxford Dictionary defines the verb *temper* as to ***“bring something (metal or clay) to a proper hardness or***

consistency.” The Bible often likens us to clay vessels. And like them, we are ultimately made from the dust of the earth. So tempering is a very appropriate metaphor for our trials and tests.

Temptation is not the penalty for being human. It is the glory of being human. It is the test that comes to a person who God wishes to use.

So think of this episode in the wilderness, not so much as the *tempting* of Jesus, but as the *testing* and *tempering* of Jesus.

Now the actual tests that Jesus was put through are quite particular to who he is, and what his strengths are. So they are specific to Jesus as a fully divine and yet fully human person.

The first test involves the possibility of Jesus misusing his divine power to satisfy his own material needs. Why not turn these desert stones into loaves of bread? (v.3)

The second test involves a dare to a foolhardy action of self-harm in order to be re-assured of God’s protection. Why not jump off the high pinnacle of the temple? (v.5) This test is even laced with deliberately dishonest quoting from Scripture to make it seem OK.

The third test offers Jesus the very thing his mission will ultimately bring about in his becoming King of kings and ruler of all, but to do it by serving someone or something other than God. (v.8-9)

Our own testing, our own temptations, are nowhere near this level, but they have this in common with Jesus’ trials: They very often concern our strengths, rather than our weaknesses.

It’s precisely in our moments of success and in our areas of greatest giftedness that our temptations are likely to arise. Like Jesus, we can be tempted *through our gifts*.

The one who is gifted with charm may be tempted to use their charm to get away with anything.

The person with the “gift of the gab” may be tempted to come up with glib excuses to justify their own misconduct.

Someone with the mind of a genius may be tempted to use this great gift to become a self-centred, self-serving master of people, and not a selfless servant of people.

It's just where we are strongest that we must be vigilant of temptation within ourselves to abuse or misuse our God-given gifts.

Now in the case of Jesus, his response to each test was to rely on holy Scripture – the revealed Word of God.

He sets us a pattern that we, too, ought to follow. For, as the writer to the Hebrews expressed it:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Whatever the trial or test that may come your way, if you go to the word of God with your heart and mind open and teachable, you will see what is right and what is wrong, and you will be strengthened in the Spirit to pass the test.

Now at this point, I want us to pause for a moment to consider this:

How did Matthew know the details of Jesus' trials in the wilderness? After all, he was totally alone out there, without any human company.

It can only be because it was something Jesus himself told the disciples about. That's a deeply personal thing he told them – the details of his own temptations. And in sharing such a personal thing with them, he also taught them how to deal with their own temptations – by falling back onto the word of God.

We, too, should not be afraid of sharing our own trials and temptations with each other. Not only ought we sympathise with and encourage each other, but it can help us remember to fall back onto the word of God the next time we are tested.

Now at the end of this morning's reading, Matthew says **the devil left him** (Jesus), **and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.** (v.11)

But be careful here. Do not think that this was the end of the temptations of Jesus. Luke ends his account of the ordeal by telling us:

When the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:13)

It's clear from the Gospels that the temptations of Jesus did not end in the wilderness.

Later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter for his words of temptation about Jesus staying safe and out of danger: **Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.** (16:23)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus refers to the apostles as **those who have stayed with me in my trials.** (22:28)

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus really struggles with what he knows he needs to do to fulfil God's purpose: **Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me,** he cries out. But then he adds, **Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.** Then Luke tells us, **There appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.** (22:42-44) And when he awakes his sleeping disciples, he tells them to **rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation** in the way that he has been. (v.46)

Even in his final moments on the Cross, he was still being tempted. Matthew tells us those passing by taunted him: **If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.** (27:40)

Some of us get worried or even despair because we think we should get to a stage when we are beyond temptation... a stage at which the power of the tempter is forever broken.

But Jesus never reached this stage at any point in his earthly life. From the beginning to the end, he had to fight his battle. And that is precisely why he understands and sympathises with our temptations. And it's also why he can help us to fight our battles.

Our struggle with temptation is never easy, but it is not something we do without help or any kind.

Firstly, it's God who, through the Holy Spirit, leads us onto the proving ground of our trials.

Here's how it's explained in the letter of James:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. (James 4:17)

When this describes something about yourself you know you shouldn't be doing or saying, then it means another test is underway.

- It's a test that can make you spiritually stronger and more like Christ.
- It's a test that ought to tell you that God is at work in you for his own good reasons and his own purposes.
- It's a test that ought to make you rely more completely on God for your wisdom, your strength and your resilience.
- It's a test that ought to bring you back to the foot of the cross in confession of sin, knowing you are the underserving receiver of God's grace upon grace.

In all of this, know that you have a Lord and Saviour:

- who understands your situation,
- who knows the degree of difficulty,
- who intercedes with the Father on your behalf, and
- who conquered every test

to win for you, if you put your ultimate trust in him alone, your blessed and eternal peace with your Creator God.

Amen.