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The Temptations of Jesus

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This week's bible reading is from Matthew chapter 4 verses 1 - 11.

Introduction

Christianity is unique among all the religions of the world in a number of ways, but I believe that one of Christianity's major contributions to mankind's understanding of God, is the teaching that God is approachable; that He is understanding and able to empathise with the day to day difficulties of human existence. In other words, God knows and understands the struggles we all face in life - and He cares.

This teaching would of course, be nonsense if God did not know what it is like to be human, and to experience the various trials and tribulations of ordinary daily life but – and this is where the unique aspect comes in - God has experienced this; because of course God did become human and lived among us, as one of us. God became the man Jesus of Nazareth - who is God incarnate.

A Great High Priest

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

"We do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet without sin."

Before we look at the temptations, I first want to say something first, about the teaching that Jesus is without sin – because this isn't a minor or secondary issue, but is vital to the integrity of Christianity and its message. For if Jesus were guilty of sin, then the Christian faith would simply not hold together; the Gospel message would not make sense, or stand up to any serious scrutiny. This teaching then, that Jesus was without sin, is a crucial one. In other words, it's not an optional extra, but is a central doctrine within the Christian faith.

Jesus' death on the cross would not have been able to save anyone, if He Himself had been guilty of sin, because His sacrifice would have been tainted, and therefore unacceptable. But it wasn't tainted – because Jesus died without sin. This is why St. John says:

"In Him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5)

And so we can be sure that our faith in Jesus is neither misplaced nor in vain. He does indeed have the power forgive and to save - meaning He has the power to raise us again from the dead and bestow the gift of eternal life, because of His sacrifice on the cross, and because He Himself is without sin. Anyway, let's get back to the Temptations He endured in the wilderness.

Temptations

After His baptism, Jesus was led into the desert by the Holy Spirit, to prepare Himself for His forthcoming ministry and gather spiritual strength for what lay ahead. Whilst in the wilderness, He was tempted by the devil in three ways. Firstly, Satan said to Him...

"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Stones into Bread

After days without food, Jesus was being tempted to use His divine power to satisfy His hunger. At first sight this may seem perfectly reasonable – after all Jesus needed to eat, just like everyone else. But Jesus had gone into the desert to fast and pray, not to eat. It's no good embarking upon a fast to draw close to God, if as soon as hunger begins to strike one immediately gives in. But the bread here in this first temptation, is symbolic of more than just food – rather it represents all those things that can satisfy our worldly desires. Satan is saying to Jesus, “Look! you’ve got power, so use it to get whatever want! Go on, give-in to your desires and your worldly cravings!”

And at the same time, Satan is also sowing doubt in Jesus mind, about His status, saying to Him, “if you are the Son of God” “if”. Jesus was being tempted to use His power, just to reassure Himself that He really was the Son of God – that it wasn't all just a delusion.

But Jesus knew exactly who He was - He had no doubts. Indeed, if Jesus' faith and resolve could have collapsed so easily at the very beginning of His ministry, there would have been little chance of His succeeding in the greater and more difficult tasks He would have to face later. Jesus however, remains resolute, and rebukes Satan, saying:

“It is written: ‘Man does not live by bread alone’.”

By this, Jesus means that true life – life that leads to eternal life - is sustained, not just by food, but by God's Word and obedience to it.

The Lord doesn't want us to starve to death of course, and we all need to eat to live; but neither does he want us to be slaves to our physical desires. People are not animals driven along only by their instincts, impulses and desires. Whilst we share much of our DNA with the Primates, we, unlike them,

are made in the image of God. So we must pay just as much attention to our spiritual life, as we do to our physical well-being.

The Temple Roof

For the second temptation...

“...the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down, for it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’.”

At one level, Satan’s challenge may even sound logical in as much as it would immediately bring Jesus fame – everybody would be talking about such a spectacular stunt, and of course talking about Jesus too. He would have the attention of the whole city of Jerusalem. But deliberately jumping from the Temple in such a way, involves testing God in a contrived situation.

Yes, in the short term such a spectacular stunt may quickly achieve fame, but such gimmicky sensationalism is not the way of God. Jesus had not come to earth simply to “show off”. If He had decided to jump off the roof of the Temple, nobody would have benefited from such an act, and it would have said nothing meaningful about Jesus or His purpose and mission. It would simply have been a pointless and rather stupid stunt.

For Jesus, the spectacular would come, but it would be in God’s time and God’s own way, and when it did happen, it would have deep meaning and purpose in God’s plan of salvation for mankind. So again, Jesus rebukes the devil, saying:

“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’.”

The Kingdoms of The Earth

The final temptation is one of wealth and power. Jesus is shown all the Kingdoms of the earth and their splendour; the devil offers them to Jesus if only he would bow down and worship Satan.

This sounds to me like the devil clutching at straws. The Kingdoms of the Earth were not Satan’s to give – they already belonged to Jesus. Scripture tells us that everything was made by Him and for Him (Philip 1:16). So Jesus, now rather tired of Satan’s games, rebukes Him for the third time, saying:

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’

Then the devil left him.”

The Word of God

Notice how on each occasion, Jesus uses the Word of God to counter Satan's temptations. Jesus doesn't try to construct fancy theological arguments to combat the devil, and there's no attempt to reason with him, either. The Word of God - sharper than any double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12) - is all that is needed to keep Satan at bay.

Obviously, Jesus' knowledge of God's Word is complete and unparalleled – after all He is the Word made flesh! Jesus' knowledge is far superior to ours, but the principal is clear enough. If we have a good working knowledge of God's Word and our hearts are right with Lord, then we will be well equipped to stand firm against the seductions and temptations of this world, and the devil will have no hold on us.

So During this time of lent then, let us learn to be faithful in public worship and private prayer, reading and learning God's Word. Not only shall we be better equipped to stand fast against temptation, but we will also grow spiritually and mature in our discipleship, making us more useful, both to God and to those around us. Amen.