



Beholding & Becoming
GOD'S GLORY
during the season of Lent.



Jesus triumphs over temptation

I visited Tonga several years ago to catch up with my daughter Katherine, (Katie, gap year), and decided to attend the local Tongan church and listen to the service in their native language, of which I knew very little.

I found a seat up near the front, unusual for an Anglican !! And settled in ready for the service.

As the priest began the sermon, even though I couldn't understand much of what He said, I knew that we were all sinners, and we were going to hell, we had been tempted by Satan and succumbed to his power over us, we needed to repent big time and seek God's forgiveness.

I was worried that the priest would have a stroke, his face was red as He shouted at us with much arm waving and gestures. I knew exactly what He meant. The members of the congregation repeated loudly, *io, io, (eo)*, which means yes, yes..... often throughout the service.

In our Gospel reading today we explore Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is armed for His mission with the power of the Holy Spirit, however before His public ministry begins, Jesus has to undergo a private confrontation with the opposing forces.

This occurs in the wilderness, the place where, traditionally, conflict between good and evil is out in the open and clear.

It was also in the wilderness that Israel, also called God's Son had undergone testing, however instead of passing the test, Israel constantly put God to the test.

In being tested as the Son of God in the wilderness, Jesus relives the history of His people, proving victorious where they had so often failed. All three temptations bear upon the same fundamental issue, the way in which Jesus will go about His Messianic mission.

Each temptation suggests a compromise that would make Jesus' mission less burdensome and in keeping with His special status as the Son of God.

The temptations are subtle and like all temptations to which the virtuous are vulnerable, they come under the guise of good.

Firstly, Jesus is hungry following His forty days of fasting so it would appear appropriate for Him to use His miraculous powers for just one moment of self-interest to provide for Himself bread from the stone.

Jesus sharp response to the devil, "one does not live by bread alone", certainly indicates a clear determination to use His powers for the benefit of others. Christ did not please Himself.

The second temptation suggests that Jesus will gain all political power and authority through the world.

Once again this is not Jesus' mission, it is not an appropriate ambition for the Son of God.

Especially to receive this power from the devil by worshiping Him, as He claims that He can give Jesus this power now, rather than waiting for it to be received from the hands of God.

This offer of authority from the devil is an easy and immediate path to lordship of the world, however by choosing that path, places Jesus in the position of present situations where rulers exercise authority in the world in oppressive and violent ways.

God's way is inclusive and serves the people rather than dominates them. This is the path that the Son of God must choose.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the devil proceeds to invite Jesus to cast Himself down and have a divine pledge of protection from God that will save Him .

For Jesus to emerge safely from this stunt would most effectively launch Him into His Messianic journey, however this feat amounts to testing God, the very fault of Israel which through the new Jerusalem, Jesus is trying to reverse.

So, Jesus refuses the invitation and what He will experience in Jerusalem will not be glory and recognition but rejection, shame and humiliation.

Therefore, Jesus emerges from this conflict with the devil, with the true direction of His ministry set in concrete. Even though Jesus is certainly the Son of God, somebody very special and beyond all other human beings in this sense, He will not exempt Himself from treading the ordinary path of human life.

Jesus as God's Son is obedient to the pattern of divine love and grace that drives Him, He will enter fully into the normal human lot of suffering and death.

The salvation that Jesus brings will not be a magic wand waved over the ills of humankind, He will enter into the pain and evil of the world to work the inner transformation that alone brings true salvation and union with God.

Swift and unhesitatingly as Jesus dismissal of the temptation has been, Luke does not mean to indicate that it was a pushover, that Jesus was not really drawn to take a different path, as we read on through the scenes in the Gospel, we should keep this episode in mind that every act of service lies in a fundamental choice for Jesus to be this kind of Messiah.

There is also a final note in Luke's version that we should not fail to observe, the devil departs from Jesus until an "opportune time", which will be the hour just before Jesus arrest on the Mount of Olives.

Then the struggle with Satan will be renewed as Jesus faces the full horror of the fate to which His costly choice has brought Him.

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent, the Gospel proclaimed is the wilderness temptation of Jesus, in Mark's Gospel it is honed to three short verses following Jesus' baptism.

"Jesus is driven into the wilderness", says Mark. We often describe people as being driven by money, power, ambition, desperation - but what drives Jesus is the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is thrown into the physical and spiritual space where, before He begins His public ministry, before He proclaims one word of the Good News. He must struggle with two consequences of His baptism; His naming as the Son of the Father and His solidarity with sinful humanity represented by the crowds on the banks of the Jordan, who were called by John to a baptism of repentance.

Now; there are no crowds, Jesus is alone with the Spirit of God, and the spirit of evil, amid the wild beasts and angels, with communion and conflict, with the struggle that will persist throughout His life and death, to be a faithful Son.

Jesus is alone with the memories of His ancestors and their wilderness wandering, in what for them, was not only a place of God's revelation and promises, but also a place of their temptation and failures. Jesus will show Himself to be the most faithful Israelite.

How blessed are we to have these words translated for us by great theologians through the centuries into language that we can understand.

We have here, before us, the contrast of Jesus temptations and human temptations, let us give thanks that we also have the gift of the Holy Spirit to drive us towards the Kingdom of God, let us also be driven by the Holy Spirit in all we do and say, so that we can also call ourselves sons and daughters of the Most High. All we have to do is say 'yes' to Jesus' call, and we offer our praise and thanks to Jesus because He gave His all for us.

Let us grasp with both hands this freedom, this salvation, this peace and love, this relationship we can experience with Jesus as we continue on this amazing journey.

ALLELUIA & AMEN.