



Philosophies and theologies come and go

First Sunday in Lent Luke 4:1 – 13

“If you are the Son of God, you can do whatever you want. Turn stone to bread, rule the world and prove yourself invulnerable.”

“Since I *am* the Son of God, I will do what God wants.”

The presence of the figure of Satan and the mention of temptation are distractions from what this story is really about – the identity and purpose of Jesus, and by extension, the identity and purpose of the church. Having this story read at the start of Lent is also a distraction. Yes, this is one of the models of Lent – the forty days of fasting, and yes, this story references the forty years of Israel in the wilderness being tested, but these are not the temptations of our lives. This story could be described as the battle of philosophical theology versus scripture. It mirrors the struggle of the disciples to understand the ministry and identity of Jesus, and it mirrors the struggle of the early church to preach Jesus crucified into a culture dominated by Greek ideas of God. A struggle that continues to this day.

One of the guest teachers we had when I was learning to be a Lay Preacher said that the worst hymn in the hymnbook was “Immortal, invisible, God only wise.” He said that it was so captured by the perfect, transcendent God of philosophy that it had nothing to say about Jesus.

One of the commencement addresses, the open lectures to start the year at college, was on the impassability of God; that God, being perfect was without feeling or emotion. And I felt like standing up and yelling, “What about the cross!”

Being the immortal God, untouched by human weakness or emotion, and bringing in the great rule of God in peace and justice, was possibly a big temptation for Jesus, but more possibly a big misunderstanding for the disciples. Peter was shocked when Jesus said, “I’m going to Jerusalem to die”. Judas was disappointed that Jesus didn’t start the revolution to throw out the Romans. At some point we have all wanted the powerful, miracle working God to put everything right. But the subtle point in the Transfiguration story is that the voice of God saying, “This is my Son”, isn’t referring to the shining white figure talking to Moses and Elijah, it’s the un-transfigured Jesus standing alone.

The story of the temptations doesn’t refute the idea that Jesus is the Son of God, it reinterprets what that means. Jesus is the Son of God on God’s terms and not on his own terms. And this reinterpretation happens at the start of the gospel, so the reader has a guide for interpretation during the unfolding story. Jesus doesn’t turn stones into bread, but when you get to the story of turning five loaves into a feast, you know that isn’t the showy Son of God trying to impress people but the loyal Son of God welcoming people into God’s grace. He doesn’t rule the world, but he does bring in the world changing kingdom. He doesn’t jump off the roof of the temple, testing if

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God will save him, but he does go to the cross, trusting that God will do even more than that. Jesus is the Son of God on God's terms.

Prayers to "Almighty God who dwells in unapproachable light", miracle working faith healers, the Holy Roman Empire, prosperity gospel, and so on. Over the centuries, the church has found itself drifting the wrong way into the temptations. Following the philosophies of the world and the grand visions of an all-powerful God, instead of hearing Jesus rebuke of the temptations as a call to humbly follow the God of grace, mercy and faith. Looking to grand constructions of God, sometimes based, as is the temptations, on scripture, and failing to look at Jesus, THE word of God. The image of God we hold and project to the world is vitally important. If we project the all-powerful, miracle working problem solver, people will become upset, damaged and disillusioned. If we project the law-giving, ruling sovereign who demands righteousness, people will feel judged and turn off. And if we project the 'just believe and trust in grace' God, we are selling God, and the cross short. Those are the temptations of philosophy over theology and scripture. The temptation to change the image of Jesus to match our emotions, or the lure of marketing an attractive religion. The story of Jesus in the wilderness portrays him as the obedient, worshipful, servant Son of God. Even though it says plainly that Jesus is full of the Spirit, this is no divine figure striding boldly through the desert. This is a very human Jesus, obviously under great physical and mental stress after so long fasting in the wilderness. And yet, he is able to rebuff the temptations and hold to the mission of bringing in the grace filled, worshipping, trusting kingdom of God.

Philosophies and theologies come and go, supported by interpretations of scripture, but Jesus remains. Jesus, the one who walks the way of God; trusting in the Father, worshipping only God, and willing to take the hard path of discipleship. That is our image for this time of reflection and intention before the great story of death and resurrection that is the centre of our faith.

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