

All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus! Amen!

We've just sung those words: words which Jesus spoke to his disciples after he had been raised from the dead. (Matthew 28: 18)

In 6 weeks time, we'll be celebrating Easter – celebrating Jesus' power to forgive sins; celebrating Jesus' resurrection power throughout heaven and earth. And yet, dear sisters and brothers, here we are at the very start of Lent, in Matthew chapter 4, observing Jesus in the wilderness as he is tempted to misuse that very power.

It seems, even Jesus could not avoid a time of testing and temptation before he started his ministry. Something about this wilderness experience was vital to prepare him for what was to come.

So, let's look at our passage. In verse 2 we read: "He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished." Does this 40 day wilderness experience remind you of anything?

There are actually plenty of Biblical examples of people being led into the wilderness for a time of testing:

- When the prophet Elijah fled into the wilderness, he spent 40 days and nights fasting until God met him in the sound of a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:8)
- When Moses received the 10 Commandments, in fact both times, he was on the mountain with God for 40 days and 40 nights, without food or drink. (Exodus 24:18 and Exodus 34:28)
- And Moses and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 YEARS before they could enter the Promised Land. (Joshua 5:6)

As Jesus was in the wilderness, maybe he was thinking about Moses and the wandering Israelites. Because, when the tempter comes to Jesus in his famished state, Jesus always responds by quoting Moses from the book of Deuteronomy.

Let's take a look at the three temptations.

The first temptation is all about **trusting God**, especially when our human nature screams out to take hold of the situation in your own strength.

Jesus is famished. He is physically weak. Just the thought of bread must have been like a dream. Was he longing to swallow huge chunks of bread to satisfy his hunger, or maybe just to slowly chew on a few sweet crumbs?

He *could* have turned stones into bread. He had the ability. We see later on in his life that he could feed hundreds from a few loaves, that he could turn water into wine. But here, with just his own needs in question, the situation was different. The words of Moses must have risen from his memory, when Moses told the Israelites that their 40 years of wandering and eating miraculous manna was in order to humble them, test them and make "understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

Through the Scriptures, Jesus knew that his personal hunger and weakness was no reason to take the easy way out and disobey God's commands.

This first temptation was therefore a test of his obedience and trust that God would provide for him in God's own way.

Have you ever felt tempted like this? I'm sure there are times in your life when you've had difficulty trusting God for your needs. Maybe you've been tempted to take matters into your own hands. Have you ever grown impatient with God, or doubted that He even heard your prayers? Have you maybe been prone to grumble, complain, moan or make threats if you didn't get what you want? Have you at any point thought that God's Word was boring, irrelevant or powerless? It's easy to be tempted like this, and Jesus knows.

Having refused to doubt God's provision, the second temptation seems to relate to Jesus' **identity**.

Remember, just 40 days before, Jesus had been baptized and had received divine confirmation that he was the beloved Son of God. His identity was clear, his relationship with the Father was clear, the fact that God loved him and was pleased with him was clear. ...Until, after 40 days of hunger and exhaustion, little doubts start to creep in.

The Devil takes him to the temple in Jerusalem, the holiest place for the Jewish people, and taunts Jesus to show off his heavenly power and prove his identity as God's son. Verse 6: "*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down*".

It was tempting, to create a crisis and see the angels rush to save him. It *could* have been possible, and it would have reassured Jesus that he was indeed a heavenly prince. Actually, the angels did tend to him after this whole experience. But again, the words of Moses came to him. His response, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" is another direct quote from the Scriptures.

Here, Jesus was reminded of another scene from the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. Moses had led the Israelites to a place which had no water and the Israelites complained violently. Moses called the place Masseh, because there the Israelites had quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?' (Exodus 17:7). The scripture which Jesus quotes is Moses saying to the Israelites, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you did in Masseh." (Deuteronomy 6:16)

Through the Scriptures, Jesus knew that this second temptation was about putting God's presence to the test, and doubting his own identity as God's beloved son.

Have you ever felt tempted like this? Do you ever question whether God loves you? Have you ever felt that you weren't really a son or daughter of God? Do you sometimes feel undeserving of God's grace, excluded or forgotten? Have you ever created an opportunity to show off? Have you ever abused your position for your own personal benefit? It's easy to be tempted like this, and Jesus knows.

So having refused to doubt God's provision, and refused to question his identity as God's beloved Son, the third temptation seems to relate to Jesus' **purpose in life**.

Jesus must have known that his mission was to bring people into his kingdom. And here was the Devil offering him a short-cut to that aim. Jesus *could* be ruler and King over all the world, right now... It was tempting. But the conditions would have cost him everything. To worship the devil, like the Israelites had bowed down in worship to the golden calf, would have broken the most important commandment.

Again Jesus quotes Moses: “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only”. (Deuteronomy 6:13 and Deuteronomy 10:20)

Through the Scriptures, Jesus knew that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5). No shortcuts. The end didn't justify the means. As we see later in the gospels, Jesus' whole ministry was dedicated to obeying his Father, to servant leadership, humble living and showing the narrow path to everlasting life, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He didn't avoid suffering. It seems that the wilderness had prepared him.

Have you ever felt tempted like this? Have you ever been tempted to accept an offer which would compromise your values? Do you sometimes feel that loving people as Jesus taught us is just too hard? Have you ever ignored a prompt from God to reach out to someone in need? Have you questioned God's call on your life? Do you often pray for an easy life, wishing to avoid any suffering? It's easy to be tempted like this, and Jesus knows.

As followers of Christ, we should not be surprised if we too end up in the wilderness, facing temptations. Temptations to not trust God, to doubt our identity as God's beloved children, to abuse our power, to avoid suffering and take the easy way out.

We may not always be able to resist temptations like Jesus did. We may fail. We may fail often. But be encouraged that we do not face these temptations alone.

The apostle Paul wrote about Jesus in his letter to the Hebrews:

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Dear sisters and brothers, let us not despair when temptations come our way. If you fall down, Jesus understands. If we fall, let us fall down in worship of the one who redeems us.

Amen