

Wilderness and weakness.

The beginning of Luke chapter 4, from which we read, is a good point to pause and to recap just where Luke has taken us thus far in the Jesus story. What has happened so far? Well, I would suggest that you could summarise these early chapters of Luke as ‘the Holy Spirit preparing Jesus for his ministry’. That would be my strap line for the first three chapters of Luke’s Gospel: the Holy Spirit prepares Jesus for ministry!

So, if we go right back to the beginning of the Gospel we find Mary being told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and overshadow her – in other words the Holy Spirit is at work in Jesus right from his conception. Even while he is in Mary’s womb, God’s Spirit is at work in him, forming him, shaping him, preparing him. And then, moving on, we come to Jesus’ baptism by John out in the wilderness and there the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus to empower him for his mission. And there Jesus is declared to be God’s beloved in whom God is well pleased: in other words Jesus is given the key to his identity, who he is. And he is going to need that because he is going to come under intense scrutiny and people are going to challenge him and question what he’s doing, and when you face that kind of hostility and opposition you need to be well grounded in who you are and who loves you.

And now, after all that Jesus is all ready to launch his movement – or almost ready. The stage is set – almost! – for Jesus to take up his task of teaching and preaching and healing and forgiving, for proclaiming in word and deed that God is catching a grip of the world. God’s rule, God’s realm, God’s Kingdom is pressing in and God’s Spirit has been at work in him ever since his conception, resourcing him for what lies ahead. But what does he still need? What is the one thing that he still requires if he is to do God’s will? Well, there is one more thing – which we’ll come to – one more crucial thing and we’ll see what it is.

First, however, we are told that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness and there he is tempted by this figure known as the devil. Before launching his mission to the towns and villages of Galilee and beyond Jesus must first take time out, as it were: time out to be alone with God – and this tempter. The wilderness has long been understood as a place where we meet

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both God and the devil, light and shade, and here therefore Jesus is found. And we are told first that at the end of his forty days in the desert he was famished and he was tempted to turn stones into bread; and then he was taken up and offered all the kingdoms of the world if he would only bow down and worship the devil; and then he was taken up to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and tempted to throw himself down and to trust God to save him. And we could ponder those temptations and their contemporary relevance and how they continue to lead us astray. So, behind the temptation to turn stones into bread and rocks into rolls we might detect the lure of materialism and the consumerism that is so rampant today. This is the mentality that debases our full, God-given humanity by neglecting the human soul and denying that we have been made for God and to enjoy God. And in being offered all the kingdoms of the world we might detect the lust for power and control at any cost, the power frenzy that causes wars and conflicts and that today wreaks havoc and destruction upon the environment. And behind the temptation to throw himself off the temple we might discern the misuse of religion and the taking of God's name in vain and we've always been all too good at that and continue to be. What Jesus is confronting here are deep, enduring tendencies of the human race. These are perennial assaults on the human spirit and they offer a deadly attraction and they seduce us by offering life but dealing death. And you could say therefore that these are in some ways universal temptations.

Yet – and here is the important thing – these were also temptations that were specific to Jesus, areas where he in particular was in danger of compromise with the devil. And this is the crucial thing about this time in the wilderness. Jesus here is coming face to face with his own weaknesses, the areas where he can be tempted and is in danger of failing. I said earlier that in these opening chapters of Luke the Holy Spirit of God is preparing Jesus for ministry. And Jesus is equipped with that Spirit who has been at work in him since the womb, and he has been given a sense of who he is and the love in which he is baptised and the place he holds in God's affections, and those are all necessary if he is to do God's will. But I said there was one more thing that he needed and here it is. It's self-knowledge: awareness of his weaknesses and where he is open to temptation. Because make no mistake: the devil here is not playing games. He is not going through the motions. These are real temptations for Jesus. There are red lights flashing here in Jesus' life, warning of places where if he is not careful he might all too easily fall.

I suspect some people might struggle with this. I think for some people Jesus is some kind of superhero who could never really come close to doing anything wrong. He's above all that, above sin, above weakness. Well, if these temptations in the wilderness mean anything at all then I don't think so. I think these temptations were real and in fact they clearly recurred throughout Jesus' ministry. So we note that the passage ends with these haunting words in verse 13: the devil 'departed from him until an opportune time.' Another translation says the devil departed, 'biding his time...' He'll be back. This battle is over but the war goes on and the devil will return. And indeed if we read the Gospel story carefully we see these temptations recurring. Remember that time when Jesus fed 5,000 people with a few rolls and fishes, and we're told that afterwards the crowds came to make him king? Wasn't the temptation to turn stones into bread for his own ends raising its head again there? And the constant pressure to be the political Messiah who would use violence to free his people – wasn't that a repeat of the second temptation to bow down to the devil in return for political power? And when in the agonies of his crucifixion we are told that Jesus was taunted to summon a legion of angels to take him down from the cross, wasn't that a morphing of that third temptation to call for divine protection to save him from death? And there was that time when Jesus' disciple Peter with a flash of insight declared that Jesus was the Messiah. And Jesus commended him and then went on to speak of how he must suffer and die. And Peter tried to dissuade him – God forbid! And Jesus had to rebuke him: 'get behind me Satan!' There was the temptation to achieve his ends painlessly and without suffering - and in fact that possibility lay at the heart of all the temptations, and here it raised its head again.

So these temptations were real and they recurred right through Jesus' ministry. And how did Jesus resist them? How did he overcome? Well, I'll tell you how. In his time in the wilderness he had confronted the temptations that were a danger to him. He had stared his own weaknesses in the face. He had identified the fault-lines that ran through his character and that could, if he wasn't careful, bring his whole life crashing down. He had named them. And that meant that when they reappeared and showed up again Jesus was able to bat them away.

In ancient Greek wisdom there was a saying, inscribed on a temple at Delphi, which said 'know thyself'. It's a wise saying indeed. Knowing yourself means knowing what you see when you look in the mirror, knowing your

strengths, your weaknesses, where you are open to temptation, where you might easily fall. And all that is necessary for becoming a mature and complete person. And it's certainly essential if we are going to be used by God and do God's will. And note that here it is the Spirit of God who is revealing this to Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who shapes us and changes us, but that involves disclosing to us things we might prefer to deny. And it's significant that it is in the wilderness that this happens because often it is when we are in the wilderness of one kind or other that we come face to face with ourselves, good and bad. Maybe it's the wilderness of failure; maybe it's the wilderness of a medical diagnosis; maybe it's the wilderness of a relationship breakdown; maybe it's the wilderness of a mental breakdown; maybe it's the wilderness of addiction, and it's certainly something that I have observed in alcoholics who attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. They often know themselves inside out – they know their weaknesses and their self-delusions because they've been in that desert and they're coming out stronger.

It's in the wilderness that the masks are torn off, the disguises are stripped and we come face to face with ourselves – and we may flinch at what we see. But the important thing is that weakness and failure are no barrier to our relationship with God. It just helps when they are acknowledged and recognised. It's one reason why we include confession of sin in our liturgy each week. And what is so wonderful is that the same Holy Spirit who discloses these things to us also ministers to our weaknesses. That same Holy Spirit who holds up the mirror can also strengthen us to resist, can help us to adjust and to reconfigure our lives so that we manage and accommodate our weaknesses and our failures and our betrayals. As Paul writes elsewhere, 'God's strength is made perfect in our weakness'.

In this season of Lent we traditionally recall Jesus' time in the wilderness, tempted and tested by the devil, and some of us try to find some way to join with him, to share his time there. Up to that point the Holy Spirit had been preparing him for his ministry and now he was raring to go. There was, however, this one thing still needful. Self-knowledge. Naming and confronting his weaknesses. For Jesus as for us, when the Holy Spirit is involved, an awareness of our weakness can be our greatest strength. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
our lips cannot begin to speak of who you are:
our Maker, our Creator, our friend, our lover.
You are the eternal one, infinite in love,
dweller in pure light,
full of life and source of all that is.
And we come to worship you, to praise you.
How can we tell of your greatness?
For we are frail, frail people,
dwellers in a land of shadows,
inhabitants of wildernesses of our own making:
vulnerable, subject to death
and guilty of sin.
O God, forgive us for our wrong choices;
forgive us for our foolish ways;
forgive us for our wrong desires.
O God, who came in Jesus not to condemn but to save,
assure us of your grace,
enfold us in your love,
renew us in your Holy Spirit,
for we pray in the name of Jesus in whose words
we pray together, saying...