

18 February 2024 Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

THE SPIRITUAL BATTLEGROUND – THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Ephesians 6:10-20

The Armour of God

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

13 Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In

addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

19 Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

8 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written:

““He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

11 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

12 Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2

where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4:1-2

INTRODUCTION

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday which marks the beginning of Lent and is always 46 days before Easter Sunday.

Lent is a 40-day season (not counting Sundays) marked by repentance, fasting, reflection, and ultimately celebration.

The 40-day period represents Christ's time of temptation in the wilderness, where he fasted and where Satan tempted him.

The season of Lent asks believers to be aware of Satan, to set aside a time for fasting, and marking an intentional focus on Christ's life, ministry, atoning death, and resurrection.

And so, after Jesus' extraordinary baptism, Luke tells us he left Jordan and went into the wilderness for forty days.

During this time, we are told he ate nothing. And it's hard to imagine how hungry Jesus might have been during that time.

We note that Jesus had his identity established at his baptism.

And Jesus was clear about his mission as the Messiah, but now ... he had to deal with the question of strategy.

Being who he was ... namely, called to reveal God and reconcile the fallen world ... how should he go about it?

And this question is the whole focus of the temptations - the how of Jesus life and ministry.

And the interesting thing is that during his encounter with the devil, the Scriptures of the Old Testament were Jesus' resource.

You see the answers that Jesus gave to the Devil ... in response to all three temptations ... came right out of Deuteronomy: two from chapter 6 and one from chapter 8.

As a Jew, Jesus was steeped in the Scriptures, and ... I like to surmise ... that Jesus might have read Deuteronomy ... especially in preparation for his own mission.

Be that as it may, when Satan makes some suggestions ... in terms of strategy ... for proceeding as the Messiah ... Jesus is prepared with answers from the Old Testament.

And what a gift ... God has given us in the Bible. That is why I make expositional preaching a priority in my ministry.

I believe, apart from the Bible, we would be ignorant ... of the nature of God ... and be confused ... about the forces of evil ... at work in the world.

But I wonder if many of us ... in spite of the clear message of Scripture ... take the existence and role of Satan ... or the Devil ... and demons seriously?

I most certainly do ... and I have had harrowing direct experience with demons.

The Bible reminds us that Satan ... and his demons ... are our ultimate adversary ... as they are indeed God's.

FIRSTLY, WITHOUT THE BIBLE ... WE CAN HAVE A SIMPLISTIC VIEW ... OF LIFE ... AND OF HUMANITY.

We think, for example, that education can make people good, or, that our problems can be solved

by electing honest and sincere people to public office.

And that to be sure is true, but it is not the complete truth.

As Christians, we should know better. We want simple answers, but the Bible makes us face the complexities of life ...

We need to understand the breadth and depth of sin in our lives ... and the cunning, deceptive and deadly work of Satan ... and demons!

I heard about a man ... who described to his friend ... the terrible hallucinations ... that had plagued him for years.

“I believed that there were wild, hideous animals hiding under my bed. Every night when the lights went out, they would come out, prowl all around the room and scare the stew out of me. But my brother finally solved

my problem.” “Oh, is he a psychiatrist?” asked his friend. “No, he’s a carpenter. He sawed the legs off my bed.”

We’d all like ... nice and simplistic ... ways to solve our problems, but the Bible reminds us that we are involved in a sophisticated contest ... with demonic principalities and powers.

At my farewell from Civil Defence Emergency Management Otago my colleagues were intrigued about my next move as a parish priest and minister. I said that I am still in ... emergency management ... it is just that the hazardscape has changed.

Instead of natural disasters like wildfires, floods, earthquakes, and pandemics I will be responding to ... demonic principalities and powers ... and sinful behaviour ... with the love, mercy, and power of God ... to bring in a new world ... the Kingdom of God.

Needless to say, I suspect they had no idea what I was saying.

In my opinion, I have no doubt that we are involved ... personally ... at a community level ... and globally ... in a struggle between human ... and at times ... demonic forces ... of light and darkness ... of good and of evil ... and of life and death.

And I am also convinced ... the Devil and demons ... don't worry much about atheists ... they don't care about people ... who do not believe in spiritual beings ... and their interplay with humanity.

Those who hold such a view ... spiritually speaking ... are unimportant in the Devil's schemes ... they are not going to cause the Devil any problems.

You see the Devil is not an atheist ... but is well aware that God exists ... and I don't think he

spends time dissuading us ... from a belief in God.

No, instead ... if we read the biblical record, Satan's basic strategy ... it seems ... is to make us believe ... that God is not trustworthy.

I say it again ... the demonic strategy ... is to undermine, to confound ... and if it be possible ... to destroy ... our experience and trust in God.

The basic lie ... is that we cannot trust God ... because Satan's modus operandi ... is to make God redundant ... to marginalise ... and to replace God.

And in the verses, we are examining in this chapter, Luke describes Jesus wrestling with the basic issues of this struggle.

During the three temptations the Devil says to Jesus twice, "If you are the Son of God."

So, can you see ... Satan is trying to make Jesus doubt his Messiahship ... to question his identity.

Now, remember, Jesus has just heard God's voice declare, "You are my beloved Son."

Satan says, "You don't believe that do you? You'd better test it now. Let's see if you can turn these stones into bread."

Now if we go back to the biblical record ... in the third chapter of Genesis ... we find the account of the original struggle between good and evil.

We read that God made a cosmos, a world of lakes and seas, animals and plants.

And that God the Creator ... was thrilled at what he had made ... but God wanted an intelligible and knowable creature who could enter into the joy of creation.

There was no other reason for God to bring us into being ... strange creatures that we are ... except that God wanted to share his joy and his creation with us.

And so, we are co-workers with the divine ... in caring for the world that God made.

And we read in the cool of the evening, God came down and walked with his creation.

Life was meant to be like that - the Creator and the created ... together enjoying creation.

But the enemy ... Satan ... entered this creation ... in the form of a serpent ... a metaphor, I believe ... because Satan is a spiritual being not a physical snake.

The Devil said to Adam and Eve, “Do you really believe God is good?”

He has told you not to eat ... from that one tree ... because the moment you do ... you will be as wise as God is.

God is not your friend. God is holding out on you.”

And we read they believed the serpent, and distrust began to grow, and the relationship with God was broken.

We read broken, absolutely broken.

Humanity was kicked out ... expelled ... from the garden of divine presence ... and of divine blessing.

Now, the Bible insists it has been broken ever since, but that God has tried repeatedly to re-establish it through prophets, priests, judges, kings, and finally through His Son, Jesus Christ.

You see ... God has gone to a great deal of trouble ... to let us know ... that we can trust him.

It probably is not too strong a point to say that this ... primal mistrust ... in life generally ... and in the goodness of God ... is behind most problems that you and I experience.

To illustrate this point ... John Claypool, a gifted preacher, tells a poignant story about ... identical twin brothers ... who never married ... because they so enjoyed each other's company.

When their father died, they took over his store and ran it together in a joyful collaboration.

One day a man came in to make a small purchase and paid for it with a dollar bill. The brother who took the dollar put it on top of the cash register and walked the customer to the door to say good-by.

When he came back to get the dollar, it was gone.

He said to his twin brother, “Did you take that dollar bill?” His brother said, “No, I didn’t.”

That would have been the end of that except that in a few hours he brought the matter up again.

“Surely, you took the dollar bill. There was nobody else in the store.”

His brother got angry and said, “I’m telling you, I did not take that dollar bill!”

From that point mistrust grew until finally the two brothers could not work together.

They put a partition right down the middle of the building and made it into two stores. They didn’t speak for the next twenty years.

One day a stranger pulled up in a car and entered one of the two stores. “Have you been in business very long?” was his first question.

“Yes, thirty or forty years,” was the answer.

“Good,” continued the stranger.

“I need to see you. I passed through this town twenty years ago as an out-of-work vagrant. I got off a bus with no money and I hadn’t eaten for days. I came by the alley outside ... and when I looked in and saw a dollar bill on the register ... I sneaked in and took it. I was raised in a Christian home and taught not to steal, and I want now to pay it back.”

He had no idea why the old storekeeper began to weep.

“Would you mind coming next door and telling my brother that story?” he asked.

Of course ... with the second telling ... the two were reconciled ... amid many tears.

Twenty years of broken relationship had been based not on fact, but on mistrust.

And allow me to say ... our basic sin against God ... is mistrust ... which gives rise to disobedience.

I believe ... the Devil hints that God is withholding something from us ... and the Devil suggests ways ... in which we can take care of ourselves ... and get what is our due.

In the temptations ... Jesus is wrestling with this age-old issue ... will he trust the Father ... or will he give into the easy options ... promised by the Devil?

**IN THE FIRST TEMPTATION SATAN
SUGGESTS JESUS WILL DIE IF HE
DOESN'T EAT.**

So, Jesus must divert ... from his spiritual life
... directed by the Father ... and take care of
himself.

And maybe ... the Devil ... is tempting us ... in
this area as well.

The old maxim **“If you don't take care of
yourself, no one else will”** ... is one version.

The devil is saying to you ... and to me ... all the
time, **“Listen ... go your own direction ... take
care of number one. Do your own thing. Make
God in your image. Walk away from religion.
Walk away from Christ”**

And ... that undermines our belief ... that we
belong to God ... and that God has a plan and
purpose ... and will take care of us.

So, as a consequence we may muster our resources ... irrespective of what the Lord is doing ... or wanting ... and we make our own bread and eat it.

Even in our dying, we are not beyond the temptations of the devil. We are tempted ... to go our own way ... and to ... eat our own bread ... ignoring the Lord.

I have seen many people die ... and some were absolutely desolate ... and full of terror.

And some chose defiantly to reject God in the face of death.

While others were peaceful ... grateful ... and looking forward to seeing the Lord ... because they had learnt to trust God ... often, I have to say, through a tempestuous life.

Jesus said

“It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

Implying, of course, obeying God ... is more important ... than looking after number one ...

obedience and trust ... are spiritual food ... for the hungry soul.

IN THE SECOND TEMPTATION, THE DEVIL PROMISED JESUS' SUCCESS.

Jesus ... the Devil said ... could have the whole world and rule it.

All Jesus needed do was worship the Devil ... and ignore what God required of him. A pretty simple suggestion, don't you think?

The end justifies the means. The means may be demonic, but the end is splendid ... for you!

And probably not for anyone else ... one has to say.

So, we can be demonically influenced ... or tempted ... to believe that our ambition is a worthy one ... and that it is OK to break the rules ... to cut moral and ethical corners.

To arrive at our goal, we need to game the system a bit.

You know ... we are influenced by the Devil when we ignore the moral and ethical boundaries ... that God has built into the universe.

And we may be captured ... brought into bondage ... by the Devil ... when we think ... we are a special case ... and above God and his will.

The outcome ... is that we have likely created a major spiritual problem for ourselves... involving the demonic principalities and powers.

So I maintain many of the problems ... we face in the world ... are more than an organisational, financial, relational, environmental, or military issues.

And I have seen this ... as a former army chaplain ... where in the heat of human conflict ... one can sense the overwhelming presence of evil ... and encroaching spiritual darkness.

The role of the chaplain ... is not only to care for those impacted by a military operation ... but more importantly ...

and often privately ... to enter into spiritual warfare ... where the destiny of individuals, communities, and even nations ... hang in the balance.

Jesus ... the Devil said ... could have the entire world ... and rule it.

All Jesus needed to do ... was to bow down and worship the Devil ... and ignore what God required of him.

Jesus replied, of course

“It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

**IN THE THIRD AND FINAL TEMPTATION,
THE DEVIL OFFERED JESUS A
STRATEGY FOR POPULARITY.**

Give the crowd something spectacular, he suggested.

Throw yourself off the highest place in the temple,
... down four hundred feet ... or more ... into the
Kidron Valley.

When you land unscathed, people will be dazzled,
and you'll be famous.

Now, this is an area ... I believe ... in which we
are still very susceptible.

Sometimes ... we are tempted to be in the
spotlight ... as president, chairperson, speaker,
preacher ... whatever it is ... principle, vice
principle, mayor, mayoress ... the possibilities are
innumerable.

It is true that ... some people find this more of a
temptation ... than others ... especially those with
an egoistic or narcissistic personality ... often
driven by a sense of inadequacy.

However, if we are trusting in God ... we don't
need to throw ourselves off the temple roof ... or

make the front page of the paper ... the front page of the ODT.

So, we should ask God ... to show us the place ... he wants us to serve.

In 1980, the world watched and cheered while Mother Teresa, a Yugoslavian nun, received her Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the suffering and dying poor people of Calcutta.

Well, the good news is ... there are thousands like her ... all over the world ... who will never get a Nobel prize ... and who will never be in the spotlight.

They live ... and some are buried ... in obscure places ... just doing the job ... without recognition ... or credit.

But the temptation is still real.

If nobody notices, why do it? Have you heard that voice?

Or, how can I be noticed ... if I do it?

Satan comes to us as an unholy trinity ... saying as he did to Jesus ... “Take care of yourself;” “Be successful;” and “Seek the spotlight and do something spectacular and God will save you.”

12 Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

IN CONCLUSION

We only know ... about the nature of Jesus’ struggle ... with the Devil ... because he told his disciples about it.

And the church is a family ... a fellowship of strugglers.

So, we may to choose to share with each other ... a confident perhaps ... the nature of our struggles and temptations.

Every Monday morning I receive a text from a person ... who has struggled many years with two grave sins ... and they give me a thumbs up ... indicating they are OK ... and that they got through the weekend ... free from the bondage of sin.

And, no matter what our challenge is ... we can encourage each other to overcome ... as Jesus did ... in the ultimate battle for the human soul.

Verse 13 says the devil departed Jesus ... to wait for an opportune time.

And believe me ... the Devil waits for us today. The Devil will seize an opportune time ... today ... or this week.

Therefore, let us ... after the example of Jesus ...
recognise the battle ... win the battle ... resist the
Devil ... and he will flee from us.

AMEN