

Jesus is tempted; that is typically how Lent begins. Fresh out of the Jordan, full of the Holy Spirit and off into the wilderness. This is a strange story, not because of Jesus isolation or his forty days of reflection, but because of the dialogue that the gospel offers between Jesus and ‘the tempter.’

This is not journalism - not an autobiography - not a first-person account from the front lines - this is gospel, which means it is to be read carefully and faithfully.

There is no indication that Jesus told this story to his disciples. That doesn’t mean we can’t trust what we read.

The Bible comes to us from a tradition of faithfulness - offered, translated, and interpreted by folks who think long and hard about what God might be like. This experience shapes the stories they tell about Jesus, and these stories have taught us much about ourselves and the world we share - they continue to teach us about the mysteries of God. So, when the author of Luke’s gospel asks us to ‘trust them’ where this dialogue between Jesus and the Tempter is concerned, we can do that, because this is more than just a dialogue between two supernatural beings.

Today’s gospel lesson suggests a clash of philosophies; the personification of Good meets the spirit of the secular world. Offers are made and rejected; positions are stated; lines are drawn; the ‘conflict’ is suspended...until an ‘opportune time.’ The temptation in the wilderness isn’t a test of Jesus so much as it is an attempt to tell us where the ‘battle lines’ are drawn.

Not just good vs evil – that’s too simplistic; this is a choice between the pursuit of God’s intentions or a world centered on personal desire, human hierarchy and individual satisfaction.

The story begins with basic human need; Jesus is hungry. The tempter suggests that the solution to Jesus hunger is simple - stones into bread. Jesus declares that there’s more to life than bread, and the ‘battle’ is on.

Once Jesus invokes God’s word as the standard, the tempter then becomes the taunter. “All this is mine!” says the tempter – ‘and I will make it yours!’

Jesus declares that God alone is worthy of worship.

The tempter even uses Scripture to justify the claims that are made: “God’s angels will bear you up – go ahead! Test the promises of God! I dare you!”

Jesus declines the dare. The embodiment of the living God can’t be fooled into abandoning principles. The temptation is over ‘until another time...’

What good is this story today? Why would we trust this story without accreditation? In a time where critical reading and thinking is becoming more and more important, what credibility does this encounter have?

Some will say “well, it’s the Bible!” And that is reason enough to trust .

There is wisdom here that makes the Bible credible - there is something - a Spirit of wonder and witness - that urges us to ask the text ‘what do you want us to know?’

And as our current reality unfolds; as we encounter people with radically different notions of how the world might work; when we are asked to make a choice between our personal desires and a pattern of compassionate, merciful action; this is when the lessons of this passage open themselves to our understanding.

Temptation is everywhere. The temptation to hide away, or to ignore uncomfortable facts. To seek personal comfort and security without regard for the ‘other.’ When we do this on a personal scale it seems harmless enough - but when selfish impulses are applied on a regional, national or global scale, the results are catastrophic.

The phrase ‘you can’t make me’ is a sign that the tempter has gained a foothold. A baseless demand for freedom (often poorly defended by Scripture) is one of the tempter’s strategies. A wild eyed threat to resort to tactical nuclear weapons is pure tempter’s mischief; a sign that the only thing that is important is the desire of the person making the demand or uttering the threat.

Temptation is everywhere in the news this week, and there are signs that a proper defence is being mounted - a defence that values humanity over hubris.

There is evidence that the battered and bruised are still offering mercy - still thinking beyond their own needs.

The selfishness that sees protesters still waving flags and demanding freedom - even as restrictions are being relaxed all over the country - has taken much of the wind from the tempter's sails. But the tempter isn't defeated, just waiting for the next opportune moment. And our choices in those moments are always the same.

The tempter's path is simple - straightforward; honour your own needs - look out for number one - keep yourself safe at the expense of 'the other.'

The path of Jesus - a path of faithful questioning and radical compassion - is still open to us. To seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God - to read broadly and think critically and act compassionately is never the easiest solution, but it is Jesus' solution. It is God's way for us.

There are times - like now - when Jesus' answers seem too simple; when Jesus path doesn't seem radical enough. How can our choosing to worship God bring peace to Ukraine? How can this ancient text bring comfort to the hungry? Where is the compassion in two years of restriction, isolation and radically altered lifestyles? The questions persist, but Jesus persists too. His pattern of thinking beyond his personal needs in the moment - a pattern illustrated by this curious gospel story - has helped shaped a compassionate Christian approach to a wide array of human concerns.

The tempter is still tempting - that much is certain. But Jesus is risen, and his Spirit still urges us to consider his way - a path that leads through the testing time to the glory of something fresh and new.