

Lent 1
14/2/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91

Luke 4:1-13

Temptation and identity

Lent has about it a strong sense of a beginning. Of course, the year has already started – both the calendar year and the church year; we’ve had Christmas, so Jesus has well and truly arrived, and already done a few things. But with there is something particularly tangible and “real” about the movement from Lent to Easter: something which causes us to sit up and watch and so seems to render all the rest to commentary or “and also”.

The beginning with which we begin Lent each year is the story of the temptation, or testing, of Jesus. In Mark’s telling of the Jesus, this is the pretty much the first thing Jesus actively undertakes; Luke takes a little longer to get to this story.

Temptation has become for us today largely a moral concept – often in some connection to sex, or tax declarations, or chocolate, or opening one’s mouth when it ought to be kept shut. It’s also something often mocked: “Let yourself be tempted” is the substance of no small amount of advertising of things we would normally consider too sweet, expensive or otherwise overly self-indulgent.

These are not the kinds of things which appear in our text this morning. There’s nothing particularly immoral in what is put to Jesus, even if we are to understand that there *is* something wrong in the devil’s proposals.

These three temptations are often interpreted as ways in which Jesus might consider fulfilling his call: bread for the hungry, political rule, religious miracle. This is a neat little triplet, and it is suggestive as a checklist for any budding messiah as to the things he or she should avoid, but it doesn’t really reflect much the details of the text.

The bread Jesus is invited to conjure up is presumably for him and not for the masses, as we hear (not surprisingly) “he was famished”. More important than the possibility of impressing people by feeding them is the preface to the temptation, “*If* you are the Son of God...” What is being tested is not what Jesus might do, but who he is and what that implies. A similar preface precedes the last temptation: *If* you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the highest point of the Temple...

What is at stake is not so much how Jesus will minister – although this is part of it. It is more a matter of who he understands himself to be and how this “being” is connected to God.

It is also often noted that Jesus counters each of these proposals with quotations from Scripture, which just as often leads to the conclusion: know your Bible! This is good advice, but it is not the point of the story. The impression we are to get from this exchange is not that Jesus knows his Scripture better than the devil and that we should too. It is, rather, that Jesus knows God: the character of this God, how God relates to his human creatures, what a truly human life looks like. When you know this, it is not so much that you “know Scripture”; rather, you are in a position to be able to write it.

This is, effectively, what Jesus does in his ministry: he testifies to the kingdom, or reign, of God. This he does not merely in the words he speaks; more deeply, he *embodies* this reign. For God's claim on Jesus – and also on us – is not that we live within some sort of divine space, but that we relate to God in the right kind of way.

Jesus refuses the bread because this is a time with God, without bread.

Jesus refuses to worship the devil because no created thing is worthy of worship.

Jesus refuses the Temple trick because he does not grant the devil's "if" – "if" you are the Son of God.

The temptation here is to *justify* himself, to prove to himself that he is who God has declared him to be. The devil's "If you are the Son" follows on immediately after the declaration at his baptism: "You are my Son". In each instance it is Jesus' own identity as in-relation-to-God which is called into question, and in each instance he refuses to deny that identity.

What this means in "practical" terms is that there is nothing which Jesus does which can be said to be "necessary". Hunger does not necessarily override all other things; the price tag on influence is not "all costs". The temptations put to him imply a necessity, an "if, then" relation: if you are this, then you ought to do that.

The "ought" is the catch. When we are tempted, we know very well the "ought not". This is the weight of years or decades of conditioning being brought to bear: you ought not to look at him, her that way; ought not to eat this or drink so much of that; ought not to lie or steal or curse. But we very rarely simply break the rules; we justify the breaking by making it an "ought": I deserve this, I need it. I *am* this lonely/depressed/rich/bored, *therefore* I can justify my actions by referring to that loneliness/ depression/wealth/boredom.

In this way we live by bread alone, we worship not so much the devil as the end without reference to the means, we test and prove to ourselves that there is no God.

Yet in these things, Jesus is free. He is free to take bread or not, to worship the devil or not. There is no "if" about his identity: he feels himself to be "held" by God. Who he is and what he does flows from God's address to him: you are my son. This is enough.

For us, it is no different when we feel that we might be tempted to move beyond grace. The thing about grace is that it is *not* necessary: it is freedom itself, given without reference to what is deserved. It is when we feel that we are moved to justify this or that action that we begin to hear the devil's voice – in the way that Jesus does in this story: if you are/need/have, then...

The gospel proposes, *gifts us with*, something else: for all that you think you need, seek first the reign of God, and whatever else matters will be added to you.

Or, perhaps more concretely: listen for God's name for you: son, daughter. It is here that everything begins, and from here is everything to be dealt with as it should be.
