

Lent 1
9/2/2025

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 26:5b-11

Psalm 91

Luke 4:1-13

Bad dressed up as good

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Deciding good from bad can be so hard, especially when bad can actually look very good. The idea of providing food for all people so that no one need go hungry seems pretty good to me. Having all the powers of the nations given into the hands of a truly good and godly person also seems pretty good. Using whatever means that might be possible to prove the goodness and the power of such a person seems good and sensible too. When we consider that this good man is Jesus there is much to be said in favour of these ways of accomplishing the good of all. Make sure all people are fed – make stones into bread. There are plenty of stones. They would make plenty of bread. This would satisfy the personal needs of the people.

Having the rulers of the world acknowledging the authority of Jesus as King of all people would solve the world's political problems. Shows of supernatural power would coerce people to believe in Jesus and that would solve the religious problems. Are these not good things? Apparently not, and how would one know?

The simple answer in the case of Jesus in the wilderness might be that Luke tells us that Jesus was tempted by the devil. Quite simply any suggestion by the devil must be *ipso facto* bad. But of course, talk about the devil presents a particular problem to our modern minds. The personification of evil in a character that can be seen and heard and touched is quite alien to us. It is not our experience. It seems to me that in the terms I have just described such a devil was not Jesus' experience either. I am not saying that the devil doesn't exist or that Jesus didn't have an encounter with the devil. I am saying that the gospel writers wrote of evil in the form of the devil because by doing so they were able to speak into the mind set of their day and overcome all kinds of difficulties that are encountered if you try to explain the events of Jesus in the wilderness in other ways. For starters a conversation between Jesus and the devil makes it clear that Jesus was not dealing with any idea of evil in himself. Promptings to do what is wrong come from beyond Jesus in the gospel writers' scheme of things.

I think, before I say another word, I had better clear up this business about the devil or Satan. I said a moment ago, 'I am not saying the devil doesn't exist.' Was I therefore saying that the devil does exist? Scripture deals with the presence of evil in different ways. Sometimes it is personified in a devil, in demons, in Satan, in a powerful angel gone wrong, cosmic power, powerful forces set against the will of God. What it all adds up to is that the bible agrees that there are forces within us and around us that are in opposition to love, health, wholeness and peace – against those things God is in favour of.

I am writing quite a long list of questions to ask St Peter at the pearly gate when I get there, and one of them is about how evil is present in the world, but at this stage of my journey I am inclined to go along with scripture, not in terms of a devil but certainly in terms of forces within and beyond human beings that are in opposition to God's plans for love and wholeness and peace.

For me, therefore, Jesus' time of trial in the wilderness was a confrontation with that power of opposition. The thing about that power is that it is dressed so respectably – more like a blue suit and red tie than battle fatigues. If there were a personification of evil in the devil I do not think he would be distinguished by horns or a pointing tail. I think he would be as respectable as you and me, and thoroughly pleasant besides. It is one of the most sinister things about evil – it is so reasonable. The choices Jesus is given are not obviously evil. They are not even selfish. They represent choices that should give good things to people. They are even backed up with texts from Scripture. They must be good. Evil is not playing fair when it dresses up as if it is good. That is particularly sinister.

Another aspect of this story of Jesus making his decisions about his ministry is that the suggestions made by the devil are the only suggestions before Jesus. He hasn't got a set of plans from Satan on the one hand and another package of ideas for ministry from God on the other. To make matters worse Jesus is in the wilderness with and by the Holy Spirit. Our reading began, *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,...* God and evil are there with Jesus and the devil is the only one coming up with the ideas. Jesus returns from the desert with the articulated ideas for how he will conduct his ministry all rejected. The ideas of the evil one are cast aside. The devil leaves Jesus, but Luke says that evil has not left forever. He says that the devil would wait for an opportune time.

Jesus comes away from his forty-day temptation in the wilderness knowing what not to do. We have no indication of a plan. The only thing that emerges as the story unfolds is that the way of God for Jesus would be the way of the cross. His way ahead is lit, but with a poor light. I interviewed a candidate for the ministry once. I asked how she would tackle the issues that faced her down the track. She said that the Lord was a lamp to her feet and light to her path but he only ever showed where the next step would be. That for me was a wonderful statement of trust. Jesus was left with the same need of trust. So are we.

We can't even come up with definitive answers to the questions of what is right and what is wrong. We don't really know how to plan for the best for our children. We can't be certain if this or that choice is God's way or if it is evil dressed up as good complete with Scriptural warrants.

We can know that Jesus knows the dilemmas we face. His temptations were greater than ours. Not only that, but temptation is not a time when God is far away. 'Filled with the Holy Spirit the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness.' For whatever reason our alone times are spirit filled times. (That is not to say that we can have lonely times when God seems far away. I want to distinguish between lonely times and alone times.) So it is that Christian people have learned to come away from their wilderness experiences, not so much with questions answered as with faith enriched – being prepared to walk with God again and to trust, one step at a time.
