

050317 sermon notes

A man walks into the pub and promptly orders three beers. The barman raises his eyebrows, but serves the man three beers, which he drinks quietly at a table, alone. When the man has finished the three beers and orders three more.

The next evening the man again orders and drinks three beers at a time, several times. And so this is repeated nightly. Soon the entire village is whispering about the *Man Who Orders Three Beers*.

Finally, a week later, the barman broaches the subject on behalf of the town. *"I don't mean to pry, but folks around here are wondering why you always order three beers."*

"Its odd, isn't it?" the man replies, *"You see, I have two brothers, and one went to America, and the other to Australia. We promised each other that we would always order an extra two beers whenever we drank as a way of keeping up the family bond."* The barman and soon the whole town was pleased with this answer, and the *Man Who Orders Three Beers* became a local celebrity and source of pride to the Village, even to the extent that people from miles away would come to watch him drink.

Then, one day, the man comes in and orders only two beers. The barman pours them with a heavy heart. This continues for the rest of the evening – he orders only two beers. The word flies around town.

Prayers are offered for the soul of one of the brothers. The next day, the barman says to the man, *"Folks around here, me first of all, want to offer condolences to you for the death of your brother. You know-the two beers and all..."* The man ponders this for a moment, then replies, *"You'll be happy to hear that my two brothers are alive and well... It's just that I have decided to give up drinking for Lent."*

Lent is about preparation and about choosing between alternative pathways. We follow the stories of Jesus' journey, and we travel with him as he makes known the news of the love and justice of God. It is a journey that faces us with the costs of following Jesus. We may well, in Jesus, have found greater love and freedom and hope than we had ever thought possible, BUT if it could up end us in that much trouble perhaps there are easier alternatives.

At its simplest level, the story of the temptations of Jesus has often been used to preach moralistic little sermons about how Jesus resisted temptation and HENCE so should we.

What is at stake in this passage has more to do with the identity of Jesus, of being in human flesh with the meaning of being God's representative on earth, and thus, with the nature of faithfulness to God.

It is no accident that the gospel writers link this story to the baptism of Jesus. At his baptism, a voice from God identifies Jesus as the beloved Son of God, and then we immediately follow with this story where Jesus is confronted by the tempter saying *"If you are the Son of God, then do this . . ."*

The linking makes it clear that Jesus is coming to terms with his identity and what it means.

This is the beginning of his public ministry. He's had thirty years of relative anonymity in Nazareth. Life is taking dramatic new turns, and with them come new temptations.

One minute he's the local carpenter, the next he's being seen as the Messiah, the Son of God. And in come the temptations.

Power, authority, the clout to change things, to make things happen.

The influence to change the whole structure of society, to right injustice, to end wars and poverty.

Well come on, look at all these people struggling in their faith.

All these people desperate to be convinced and really believe in God.

You want them to know you're the Son of God don't you?

What kind of Messiah is Jesus going to be? A leader with publicity stunts and power grabs, or a leader who is willing to suffer and die for his people? This is the question at stake here.

Of course many of us would question whether this story was really Jesus being confronted by a devil IN person. We can accept that Jesus withdrew from the crowds to go into a quiet place, a lonely place to test his calling, and recognising that he would be tempted like ordinary humans. This is almost certainly a summary story rather than a single incident. This story too, is more important than just what happened to Jesus one day. This is what happened to Jesus all the time.

Matthew's account ends *Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him.*

Luke's account ends *When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while.*

Another translation puts it *left him until an opportune moment.*

You can be sure that at every moment of choice, and at every time he was tired or a bit low, the temptations arose again for Jesus. There must be an easier way.

SECONDLY let me point out something about the Bible. Beware of voices saying do this because the Bible says; do that because God says ; I'm right because the Bible says.

That is exactly what the devil says to Jesus in this story. Three times. No doubt you've heard people say that you can make the Bible say anything you like. Well here is the proof.

In the hands of the evil one the Bible can be made to support evil. The bible has been used to support apartheid, to support slavery, to justify wars, to condone the oppression of women, to justify the vilification of homosexual people.

The Bible has been used to turn the good news of freedom in Christ into bad news of fear and condemnation and restrictive legalism. The devil is an extremely competent user of the bible.

If we are to be confident of the meaning of any scripture, we must be sure that it is being understood in terms of the tough-active-love of Jesus that will not compromise his mission of bringing the reality of God's love and acceptance to all people.

If I'm honest, I find it very difficult indeed to think of Jesus as sinless – I am just not quite sure what it means. I find it hard to imagine what sinlessness would look like. But when I look at Jesus what I do see is a life that did not fall short. Here was a man who loved God and loved people all the way to the edge and beyond.

Here was a man who in his ministry revealed the full dimensions of what it means to be human, the true Adam.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
which did in Adam fail,
should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive, and should prevail;

O generous love! that he who smote
in man for man the foe,
the double agony in Man
for man should undergo.

This season of Lent that we have begun this week is a season of self-examination.

We are invited to take time to take a long, hard look at ourselves. Before we do that let's take a long, hard look at Jesus and a life that did not fall short. He knew himself to be God's beloved and he lived as God's beloved.

Praise to the holiest in the height and in the depth be praised