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✠ Luke 4: 1 *“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil”.*

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness after his forty days of withdrawal from the world are extremely well known to us from Sunday school days. I can well remember our parish priests in North Queensland who were all Oxbridge trained bush brothers, back in the 1930’s trying to explain their meaning to us at the beginning of Lent. I confess that I cannot recall from those long past decades ago how they interpreted them. I do remember, though, that there was no attempt to explain the devil away. The incarnation of evil was an image very much preserved in the sermons of the then bush brothers. Of course, nobody thinks of the devil today as he is depicted in sculptures to be found in ancient gothic churches and cathedrals in Europe. But nobody can deny that evil exists and that we are confronted with it on a daily basis. Leaving aside the ancient imagery in the story we are confronted by the inner struggles of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, who had perceived that he had a calling from almighty God to bring about a revolution in the Synagogue. -- That we need to keep in mind. It was not Jesus’ intention to split off from the Synagogue, but to reform it from within.

The so-called temptations in the wilderness come 40 days *after Jesus had been baptised*, the event that signalled that he had a special vocation to carry out a work of renewal. So what is the best way to go about this? Go into the desert and reflect. This is what we need to do, figuratively, of course. Let us look at the three temptations in turn.

1) “Command this stone to turn into bread.”

Behind this very strange suggestion lies a temptation common among all sorts of religious people. It is very presumptuous because these people think, that because of their fervent religiosity that they have some special right to get God to change things the way they want them. We run into these people all the time. Because of their self-righteousness they fall into the error of thinking that God is at their disposal. But God is never at

our disposal; *we are at His disposal*. The idea to use His power as God's son for his own convenience Jesus recognises immediately as a very bad temptation, and he answers it immediately with a quote taken from the Jewish scriptures, namely Deuteronomy 8: 3 where it says "Not on bread alone shall man live." Later, as we well know, Jesus said "I have come down from heaven *not to do my own will*, but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38). So right from the beginning of His ministry Jesus was aware that He was utterly at His Father's disposal, NOT the other way around.

- 2) The second temptation is to enter into a pact with the devil for complete control of the world. This is a particularly subtle and wicked temptation, namely to claim we are operating on principles derived from God when in reality we are following our own selfish desires like some Latin American war-lord or the totalitarian dictators who have been the scourge of the world in our life time. The great Cambridge historian, Lord Acton was right when he wrote , "All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Dietrich Bonhoeffer realised this when he was confronted by the Nazi dictatorship because he immediately picked up on Hitler's wickedness in demanding that everyone should submit themselves to his will as Leader. Bonhoeffer answered there was only one person to whom one could and should submit one's will and that was almighty God Himself. In Jesus' case He answers with another quote from Deuteronomy (6: 13, 10:20) :
You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."
- 3) The third temptation from the pinnacle of the Temple: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, "He will give his angels charge of you to guard you." -- The idea that Jesus should leap from the tower to prove that because he was God's Son he would be rescued in mid fall is the sin of *presumption*.. And we all yield to this temptation whenever we presume that because we are faithful observant Anglicans, God will inevitably look after us, no matter what. A good example is one I recall from my youth when we

followed boxing. There was a champion boxer named Vic Patrick, born Victor Lucca, a very famous welter-weight in his time. He was an Italian Roman Catholic as his real name suggests, and at every bout he came out of his corner when the bell rang to begin a round he very quickly made the sign of the cross with his right glove. It was hard to see because his left hand was in the way, but that is what it was. And one of the commentators said to the other, “Do you think that will help him to win?” And his colleague replied, “Not if can’t box”. But to give Vic Patrick his due I do not think he believed he was asking God to help him to win, but rather to allow him courageously to do his best. He knew very well that the outcome of the match was up to himself, but we still run into many people who believe that because they are faithful, they deserve God’s special help in all that they do. And that is, again, the sin of presumption. Jesus rejected this final temptation also with a quote from Deuteronomy (6:16):: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”.

Finally, sisters and brothers in Christ, of course, the Biblical setting of the story is very fanciful but its essential elements are very real and up-to-date. The way Jesus handled the three temptations teaches us three things: First our Anglican expression of Christianity does not give us any kind of supernatural power that we can selfishly employ in order to get what we want or think we need. Second, if we are trying to serve God, there are no moral short cuts, and thirdly we cannot expect that just because we are faithful Christians that God will save us from the natural consequences of our own foolishness and sin.

When you think about it, it is absurd to imagine that we can exploit God, say, to become prosperous or to ensure that we will never get sick or to make a perfect marriage and so on. But we are assured through our religion that God is close to those who are prudent, who exercise self-discipline and moderation and who try to obey the commandments, to practise justice in all our relationships, to be peace-makers and reconcilers in this world, to be hospitable to the stranger within our gate. All of these things are very relevant precepts which will help us to live a tranquil and harmonious life, and it is timely that we ponder them at the

beginning of Lent this year and put them into practice. When we do, we experience God as St Paul described Him in today's Epistle, namely as the One who is indeed "rich in mercy to all who call upon Him." †