

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 8”
Matthew 4:1-11

One of the things for which London’s organising of the Olympic & Paralympic Games has been praised, both in the United Kingdom and in the wider international community is the legacy that has been built into the planning and construction of the various Games sites. There are, so we are led to believe, long-term benefits to be gained from the Olympics that will have an impact on future generations in terms of housing, regeneration, re-usable venues and so on. This long-term view contrasts sharply with much of what we see around us today. Much of what we see and do in our culture today is very much governed by a short-term view of things.

Partly that is a result of the abundance of technology which has become part of the very fabric of our society. We live in an instant society. With the facility of the Internet and mobile ‘phones, with electronic gizmos and hi-tech apparatus you can do pretty well what you want when you want. Via your computer you can log on to the school website and find out if your child is in the class she should be in (and if the system is working, you can track her marks as well). You can order something on the Internet from a firm the other side of the world and find that the whole transaction has been completed in the time it takes to click a computer mouse. If you see something in a shop that takes your fancy, you can go and get it immediately, using cards and PIN numbers and so on. It seems that there is nothing that cannot be done now! A book published this week by the financial guru Professor Frank Partnoy suggests that instant modern technology forces us to abandon patience and make snap decisions.

And there is a feeling within all of us, I think, that we want things as soon as we can possibly get them. I’ve often quoted the original slogan for Access, the first widely available credit card in Britain – *“Take the waiting out of wanting”*, which seems to be the watchword of our generation. Everything has to happen immediately. We want our profits and rewards immediately. We want a return on our investments immediately – hence the rather risky business that banks have got themselves involved in in recent years. We want fame and celebrity immediately, so pop stars are now manufactured by a television series rather than spending time on the road honing their talent. We want sporting success immediately, so we have recourse to drugs and potions rather than more focussed training. We want gratification and self-satisfaction immediately, so we don’t put the work and effort into building relationships, and marriages are ended at the first sign of any difficulty. And relationships, like jobs and so many other things, can be brought to an end by the instant proclamation of a text message or a Facebook announcement.

It seems that commitment, hard graft, patience, training, the long, slow development of attitudes, competences and skills, the long-term perspective – all those things have gone out of the window because of our desperate desire to get our hands on things now. It’s nothing new. It’s always been a part of our humanity, ever since the time Adam and Eve tried to take the short cut to knowledge by eating the forbidden fruit, since Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of soup, since the Prodigal Son demanded his legacy long before it was due. And it’s that very human attitude of short-termism which is, I believe, at the root of Jesus’ temptations, of which we have just read.

Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us that Jesus faced the same temptations that we did. He had to confront the same temptations that come our way, the temptations to go for the quick fix, the short term solution, the things that will benefit me here and now, no matter what the implications are for other people or for the future. Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. He was shown to be vulnerable and open to the things which affect us as human beings. That vulnerability must have been evident when he told his disciples about this episode in the desert. No-one else was present, so the gospel writers must have heard this from Jesus himself at some point. And these temptations, as we call them, follow on directly from Jesus’ baptism, which we considered last week.

You’ll remember, I hope, that as Jesus came up out of the water, having been baptised by John and thus demonstrating his solidarity with fallen humanity, the voice of God was heard, declaring that Jesus was

his Son. This is his destiny, his vocation – to make God real to us as he ushers in God’s Kingdom. His vocation as the son of God is now to be tested – the Devil begins his tempting of Jesus with the words “*If you are the Son of God ...*” The Greek word that is used here and elsewhere in the New Testament means not just “temptation” in that rather negative way that we usually view it, but also “testing”, a more positive spin on it, maybe. Jesus’ vocation, his obedience to God’s call, is to be tested so that through it he can be built up and prepared for the ministry that is to follow.

That’s the same with his followers, too. We are tested by God as he allows our circumstances to shape us and prepare us for the work which he has for each of us to do. As William Barclay puts it: “*What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin. It is not meant to make us bad; it is meant to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us; it is meant to make us emerge stronger and finer and purer from the ordeal. Temptation is not the penalty of being a man; temptation is the glory of being a man. It is the test which comes to a man whom God wishes to use.*” Or, as Michael Green puts it, far more succinctly, “*Temptation builds spiritual muscle.*” Jesus is tested to see his response, to see if he is fully committed to the vocation that has been given him, to see if he will resist giving in to the temptations that come his way – and let’s not forget, there are other temptations which he faces in his life after this, not least the temptation to somehow avoid the cross as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. For that to happen, these must be real temptations. It’s not some kind of stylised way of showing Jesus to be human. Jesus could have given in to any of these temptations and the things offered to him were indeed real. The Devil could have given him power, because he is acknowledged elsewhere in the New Testament as the Prince of this age, as the one who can exert real power over people.

So Jesus is led out into the Desert, where hunger and solitude weaken him for nearly six weeks, for forty days, in fact. That’s a significant number. You see, there are very clear parallels here – which would have been very obvious to Matthew’s original Jewish readers – with the experience of Israel after leaving Egypt. They were taken out into the desert where they wandered for forty years. We read about it in *Deuteronomy 6-8*, the very section of the Hebrew Scriptures from which Jesus draws all three of the quotations with which he counters the Devil’s seductive blandishments. And in *Deuteronomy 8:1-5* it is explicitly stated that it was to test them and their commitment. Listen to this: “*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these **forty** years, to humble **and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.** He humbled you, causing you to **hunger** and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*” The testing, the temptations of Jesus are very clearly linked to this theme. But the one great difference between the two episodes is that Israel yielded to temptation, they buckled under the testing, whereas Jesus resisted and overcame the wiles of the Devil.

So let’s just look briefly at these three temptations, which the more eagle-eyed of you will have noticed appear in a different order here from the order in which Luke relates them in his gospel. But they are the same three temptations and they have the same underlying theme.

Firstly, the devil tries to get Jesus to turn stones into bread for his own satisfaction. Jesus has not eaten for nearly six weeks. The attraction of getting on and feeding himself must have been immense. He would be weak and struggling with all the side-effects of really ravenous hunger, pretty well at the point where a human being can no longer survive. And the devil says to him, “OK. So you reckon you’re the Son of God. You’ve got some pretty remarkable powers. Why not just use those powers and get it all sorted?” We know that Jesus can produce stuff miraculously – look at the feeding of the five thousand, the feeding of the four thousand, the turning of water into wine. This is not beyond him – if it was, this wouldn’t be a proper temptation. Will he use the power he has to bring a short-term solution to his own personal problem?

No – he won’t. Jesus counters that what he really needs to rely on is God’s word. God will provide. He needs to wait for that. There is no excuse for seeking immediate gratification of his own appetites and desires, because his Father has promised to supply all his needs. Don’t go for the quick fix. Don’t

misuse the powers that you've been given to fulfil your ministry or to satisfy your own desires. (And there's a word to many a televangelist and megachurch – and other – leader who finds the seductive lure of money and fame too much to cope with.) Stick to what God has promised.

So the devil takes Jesus – literally or in some kind of vision – up to the very top of the Temple. Now the Temple at this time, recently rebuilt by good old Herod the Great, of whom we have heard recently, was built at the edge of the rocky outcrop on which the city of Jerusalem stood. So the top of the Temple – certainly in one corner – was a good 400 feet above the ground at the foot of the crag. Now the devil suggests that Jesus could leap off the Temple and land safely on the ground, thus proving God's promise that he'd look after him and also making a spectacular entrance into his new ministry. "Go on," he says, "if you're really the Son of God, that should be easy – and God's promised to help you anyway." On top of the simple spectacle of such a stunt, the Jewish people believed at this time that if the Messiah appeared, he would appear on top of the Temple. Two birds with one stone – a crowd-pleasing stunt and a very clear demonstration that he was who he said he was.

Again, Jesus responds with words from *Deuteronomy*. God does not want to be blackmailed into saving him. God is not to be put to the test by his creatures. But isn't God there to help his people when things go wrong? Doesn't he say to his people in *Malachi 3:10*, "Test me in this"? How do we resolve that apparent dichotomy? Aren't we testing God when we ask for his help in times of extremity? Yes, but that is a different situation from this one. R T France sums it up in his words on this section: "*Christians perplexed by the apparently thin line between 'the prayer of faith' and 'putting God to the test' should note that the devil's suggestion was of an artificially created crisis, not of trusting God in the situations which result from obedient service.*" Once again, Jesus would be trying to take the short cut, trying to launch his ministry in a way that courted popularity and avoided the lengthy commitment of sacrifice and servant hood. He would have been misusing his powers to gain immediate effect.

So the devil has one more go. He somehow gives Jesus a vision of the whole world, emphasising the power and splendour of everything on offer. Jesus can have the lot. After all, God has promised his Son the whole world: everything will one day be under his dominion, every tribe and nation will one day have to bow down and worship him. Paul writes this in *Philippians 2:9-11*: "*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" It's only doing what God has promised already, claiming his share of the inheritance. And it avoids all that unpleasantness with the his critics and opponents and the messy business with the cross. All it needs is a little bit of compromise, a quick nod of the head to the Devil and he's got the result that was always intended anyway.

But Jesus points out that this isn't the way forward, because it ignores the fact that God alone is worthy of worship. God alone is the one Jesus is serving. That's what it really means to be God's Son. He cannot short-circuit the long and carefully laid plan that God has been hatching since the beginning of time. The path marked out for him is, as we've said, the path of sacrifice and servanthood, not of showmanship and spectacle. He is to trust his Father and carry out his vocation, painful and perilous though it will be. There are no short-cuts to success in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is tempted to become a conjuror and a showman, to be a mighty conqueror and entertaining crowd-pleaser rather than a suffering servant. He could have taken the short term view. He could have gone for the short cuts – success now, but ultimately failure in the long term. He could have compromised and gone for the old "end justifies the means" approach. After all, he'd be fed, he'd announce his ministry, he'd get to rule the kingdoms of the world – all perfectly laudable aims and all, eventually, part of God's plan for him. But what would have been lost in the gaining of them? There would have been no sacrifice. There would have been no cross. There would have been no redemption for creation, no salvation for humanity. There would have been no single-minded, focussed worship of the One True God. He stuck to his guns and in the end it all worked out. As soon as the devil had left him, angels

came and provided for him, feeding him and nursing his weakened body and battered spirit back to health and strength.

But, as we've already remarked, those temptations, that testing of his call stayed with him to the very end. Look at *Matthew 27:40*. Even as he hung on the cross, just three days from the victory that would vindicate his stubborn refusal to yield to temptation, what did the scoffers shout out to him? "*Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!*" He still refused to give in to what was still a very valid temptation – he could have got down if he'd wanted. But he hung there for you and me, holding out for the long-term view, refusing to use his powers for his own selfish ends – and died. And then, what did they say of him? "*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'*" (*Matthew 27:54*) Only after his sacrificial death, after the true fulfilment of his vocation has taken place, after his destiny has been accepted, do others acknowledge him as the Son of God.

And what is, I believe, at the heart of these temptations and at the heart of the temptations that come our way is the desire to get it all now. We want to be fulfilled, satisfied, enriched now, immediately – without any of the waiting, any of the hard work, any of the patience that is necessary. And, more to the point, without any reliance on God and his timing. We're not prepared to wait, not prepared to trust. God has got it all sorted out. He has his plan for your life and mine, for this church, for this nation. We cannot short-circuit that, try as we might.

We look to gain advantage in the short term. Isn't that what the Lottery is all about? Isn't that what this ludicrous casino banking is all about? Isn't that what such things as the unholy marriage of new technology and old style gambling in the form of in-play betting is all about? The devil tries to persuade us that there's an element of skill or knowledge in it all, but there isn't. Look at the ways in which people walk out of marriages just because their own personal needs are not being met how and when they want, with no thought of sticking with it and working at it. Look at the ways in which educators train people for a particular skill set, a specific job, rather than building the knowledge and wisdom to live life to the full. Look at the ways in which many Christians try to misuse their own God-given gifts to promote themselves or to achieve some short-term benefit or popularity. Look at churches where there's a new vision every couple of months because they're not prepared to stick with what God has told them and work at building up their ministry.

We need to take a long, hard look at the Bible, at God's word and recognise that God is the Ancient of Days not a kind of celestial Google. He's not there to satisfy our short-term whims, but to bring about his long-term plan, the plan that Matthew has been emphasising in his constant references back to the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. The devil might like to try and convince us that we know what's best and encourage us to seek the short-term fix and short-term kicks, but our response should be that of Jesus – the Bible is our guide and we follow where God leads: patiently, carefully and, above all, trustfully. Things may be difficult for you at the moment. There are surely situations that we want to see resolved as soon as possible. We'd love it if a miracle could happen and everything fell into place (and, of course, I don't want to discount the miraculous). But God's got it all sorted out. Let's not mess it up with our attempts to hurry it all along. Jesus came through the test successfully, so let's pray for God's strength to help us through the testing times as well.

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At Jesus' baptism the voice of God was heard, declaring that Jesus was his Son. That vocation is now to be tested – the devil begins his tempting of Jesus with the words "*If you are the Son of God ...*" Jesus' vocation, his obedience to God's call, is to be **tested** so that through it he can be built up and prepared for the ministry that is to follow. And we are tested by God as he allows our circumstances to shape us and prepare us for the work which he has for each of us to do.

Jesus is led out into the desert, where hunger and solitude weaken him for forty days, a significant number. There are parallels with the experience of Israel after leaving Egypt. They were taken out into the desert where they wandered for forty years. We read about it in *Deuteronomy 6-8*, from which Jesus draws all three of the quotations with which he counters the devil's suggestions. And in *Deuteronomy 8:1-5* it is explicitly stated that it was to test them and their commitment. The one great difference between the two episodes is that Israel yielded to temptation, whereas Jesus resisted.

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Then the devil takes Jesus up to the top of the Temple (400 feet up) and suggests that Jesus could leap off and land safely on the ground, thus proving God's promise that he'd look after him and also making a spectacular entrance into his new ministry. The Jewish people believed at this time that if the Messiah appeared, he would appear on top of the Temple. Again, Jesus responds with words from *Deuteronomy*. God does not want to be blackmailed into saving him. God is not to be put to the test by his creatures.

Finally the devil gives Jesus a vision of the whole world, emphasising the power and splendour of everything on offer. Jesus can have the lot. After all, God has promised his Son the whole world. Look at *Philippians 2:9-11*. But Jesus points out that this isn't the way forward, because it ignores the fact that God alone is worthy of worship. (The testing of Jesus' call stayed with him to the very end. Look at *Matthew 27:40-54*.)

And what is at the heart of these temptations and at the heart of the temptations we face is the desire to get it all now. We want to be fulfilled, satisfied, enriched now, immediately – without any of the waiting, any of the hard work, any of the patience that is necessary. And, more to the point, without any reliance on God and his timing. We're not prepared to wait, not prepared to trust. God has got it all sorted out. He has his plan for your life and mine, for this church, for this nation. We cannot short-circuit that, try as we might.

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Questions for discussion

1. What is the significance of Jesus' 40 day fast? Should we fast today? Why/why not?
2. Is it true that Jesus faced every temptation that we face? Does that encourage you? Why/why not?
3. Why is it OK for Jesus to quote from the Bible, but not the devil?
4. Why are we so attracted to short-term solutions? What (if anything) is wrong with them?
5. How can we misuse the gifts and powers that God has given us?
6. Why was it so important for Jesus not to take any short-cuts?