

Sermon 1st May 2022

No Idols

Readings: Exodus 32: 1-14 and Matthew 4: 1-11

The temptations of Jesus is an episode in the gospels which we typically reflect on at the beginning of the season of Lent. Today, however, we are looking at it in connection with our sermon series on the Ten Commandments. This week we are looking at the second commandment: *Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image*; and our point of connection today is that in the temptations of Jesus, we see how Christ himself was tempted to forms of idolatry.

So let us set the scene. After Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the Judean wilderness for a time of testing, a time of preparation for ministry. And following an intense period of fasting the Devil appeared to him, tempting Jesus to desire something other than his heavenly Father as his sole object of devotion, tempting Jesus to turn instead to idols. So this morning, we will consider the nature of these temptations and Jesus' victory over each of them, before considering how we might feel better equipped ourselves to live the Christian life. So let us turn to the text.

As you heard the passage read, you may have noticed a repeated phrase. Did you notice what precedes the first and second temptation? In verse 3 and verse 5, the devil's opening gambit to Jesus is: "if you are the Son of God ...". Now of course, Jesus *is* the Son of God. But the point is, this question posed by the devil exposes the nature of temptation. The temptations revolve around the question of identity. *If you are the Son of God*. So, our key theme is identity.

With this theme in mind, let us consider the first of the three temptations. *If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread*.

Here, temptation is presented as a derailing force that seeks to move the centre of our identity away from God, toward other things (and often good things). Temptation is the subtle pull or push that moves us off-centre, enticing us to build our lives on a foundation other than God. The result of this is that our moments of weakness often make us feel less like our true selves. And the proof of this (which I am sure we can all relate to) is that after we slip up and make a mistake, our first reaction is very often to say to ourselves "Why did I do that? – That's not who I am. That's not the sort of person I want to be."

Look carefully again at this first temptation. The devil preys upon Jesus' physical fatigue following his fast, but the temptation is not simply "If you are hungry, get yourself something to eat." Rather, the temptation goes much deeper than that, questioning Jesus' very sense of identity. *If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread*. The temptation here is to make a false connection between Jesus' sense of identity, and the way he expresses that identity outwardly, between sense of self and self-expression. The temptations of Jesus are an attempt to make him prove who he is by turning to things other than his heavenly Father. But Jesus' identity is more than a matter of bread. Hence his reply: *It is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*.

The nature of this first temptation preys on Jesus' physical desires. He is hungry, but he will not be defined by his hunger. It is not, fundamentally, who he is. The Son of God does not live on

bread alone. And this is a challenge for those of us who struggle with all forms of physical desire, whether it is gluttony, lust, vanity etc. For those of us who obsess about our diets or our looks, and become addicted to gym culture or hook-up culture, what is in fact happening is that the centre of gravity as to who we are is slowly shifting. What is happening goes deeper than the desire for food or intimacy. Rather, these things become the substitute cornerstones on which we build our lives. And so we thank God for Jesus— in whom we have a sure foundation on which to build our lives, and a guarantee that we can be defined by his victory over sin, and not our own failures.

But the temptations of Jesus continue. The devil moves away from Jesus' physical appetite and considers instead another form of desire: the desire for glory. Note again the opening gambit, *If you are the Son of God* - a reminder that the true target of temptation is our very identity. Here, Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the temple, and is tempted to a particular form of idolatry – to place himself over and above the authority of God the Father. We might paraphrase this second temptation like this: “If you are God’s Son, why don’t put Him through a few tests of your own? Why don’t you see if He really loves you? Why don’t you see if God really is as good as his word?”

No doubt this test had a unique resonance for Jesus, but we too can be tempted to put God to the test. This is when we place our own inflated sense of self, our ego, above God. We fall prey to this form of temptation by worshipping the idol of self. We enthrone ourselves in the space that only God should occupy as our Creator and Redeemer. Now we may think to ourselves, “surely no one is so brazen as to openly challenge God’s authority.” But the reality is, this form of temptation is often much more subtle than that. As an example of this, consider the gratification and affirmation we feel when someone congratulates us on a job well done. This is good, and healthy. We are edified by words of praise. But we find the distorting power of temptation at work when we find ourselves craving the attention and praise from others for its own sake. And we know the cart has really been put before the horse when we start to bend over backwards to obtain the praise of others, regardless of who it is, or what it requires us to say or to do to obtain it. This is when we know we have begun to undermine our godly foundation and started instead to build our lives on the idol of self. Jesus, however, Son of God though he be, has a right sense of perspective, and replies (as we should) *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test*. Again, we thank God for Jesus – in whom we have a sure foundation on which to build our lives, and a guarantee that we can be defined by his victory over sin, and not our own failures.

We have, so far, seen temptations of two kinds: those of physical or sensuous desire, and the appetite for glory. And finally, we come to the third temptation. Power. Here, all form of subtlety is brushed aside. Ironically, though, we see the desire for glory at work in what the devil in this third temptation, when he falsely promises Jesus: *All these kingdoms and their power I will give you, if you bow down and worship me*. This might not be prefaced by the repeated phrase *If you are the Son of God*, but it would certainly be a statement of Jesus' identity were he to acquiesce to this temptation.

A good working definition of power is “the ability to effect change.” Power is a good thing. Even the desire for power can be a good thing. We may seek out the ability to effect change for good reason. But power for power’s sake is all too common and corrupting a desire.

A profound question to ask of someone eager to climb the ladder, be that at work, in politics, in the church is: “Why do you seek increasing responsibility?” Power is useful, but only when directed toward its proper task, and not hoarded as a token of distinction to lord over others.

Jesus is not for a minute tempted, for all power is ultimately derivative, and secondary to the power of his heavenly Father. There are no kingdoms on earth to rival the power of the Almighty. Jesus knows that the temptation of glory is the jealousy of what belongs to God, and the temptation of power is the jealousy of what God can do. They are ultimately two sides of the same coin, two ways to commit the same form of idolatry. Jesus yearns neither for the glory due to his Father, nor for the power his Father wields. Jesus does not wish to place himself in his Father's throne, either for what it would bring him (glory) nor for what it would give him (power.)

Again, we thank God for Jesus – in whom we have a sure foundation on which to build our lives, and a guarantee that we can be defined by his victory over sin, and not our own failures.