

6 March 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11  
Romans 10:8b-13  
Luke 4:1-13

“The end justifies the means.”

Over the past two weeks we have witnessed the outworking of this popular philosophy in the grounds of our nation’s Parliament. Protestors occupying the grounds have justified behaviour that in other places at other times would have been regarded as unthinkable, on the basis that there is some greater good at stake.

The philosophy has ancient origins, perhaps going as far back as Machiavelli.<sup>1</sup> The particular expression of the philosophy – the phrase “the end justifies the means” – is attributed to Sergey Nechayev, a 19th century Russian revolutionary. He was known for his single-minded pursuit of revolution by any means necessary, including murder.

The idea is ancient, and has come to form part of a political philosophy called consequentialism. The basic idea is that a policy can be judged by its outcome. But here’s the thing: all modern versions of consequentialism have to deal with the limitations necessary to prevent tyrants abusing the idea.<sup>2</sup>

While it is a popular phrase, and is a convenient way of making excuses, I think we all recognise deep down that it is not absolutely true.

We know for example that the question of whether the means was appropriate to the end will be levelled at the Police and other authorities as the recent events outside Parliament are investigated and reviewed in the days and weeks to come. And the question of whether there has been sufficient justification for the application of particular powers by Government during the pandemic has been called into question by some of the protestors, and has been and continues to be reviewed by the courts; it will no doubt be subject to further inquiry in years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Mintz, “Do the ends justify the means”, blog article 2 April 2018, <https://www.ethicssage.com/2018/04/do-the-ends-justify-the-means.html> Viewed 4 March 2022

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia articles on “The end justifies the means” and “Sergey Nechayev”, [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_end\\_justifies\\_the\\_means](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_end_justifies_the_means) and [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey\\_Nechayev](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Nechayev) Viewed 4 March 2022

The Parliamentary protests, and commentary on their underlying cause, have also thrown up questions of social cohesion and our sense of national identity.

The protests have highlighted issues with the stories people tell about themselves and the histories that have formed them, and issues with disinformation.

All of these ideas – ends and means, social cohesion and identity, stories and histories and disinformation – are at the centre of our readings today.

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Following the high point of his baptism, Jesus finds himself in the wilderness. And there he is tested by the devil over a period of forty days. At the end of those forty days there come three final tests.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus has eaten nothing for the period and is of course hungry. The devil says to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” The devil’s intention is not to have Jesus prove that he is the divine Son – the devil knows it already, after all – nor to have Jesus prove that he can perform miraculous deeds. Rather, the devil is trying to divert Jesus away from the God-ordained means by which he is to go about his life and ministry. The temptation operates on a level akin to someone suggesting to Jacinda Ardern during the occupation – “If you are the Prime Minister, declare martial law in Wellington and send in the army.” Jesus is faced with the temptation to move away from the proper means by which he is to go about his life and ministry, which includes how he is to address his immediate hunger. Not for Jesus the way of power and ease – unlike the other rulers around at the time. Rather the Jesus way is going to involve considerable suffering and hardship.

Jesus resists the temptation by resorting to Scripture, quoting Deuteronomy, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” The verse continues “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” It refers to the absolute priority that should be

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<sup>3</sup> The following discussion of the temptations owes much to Garland, pp. 178-184.

placed on the relationship to God, a priority that stands over even a legitimate desire to address his physical hunger.

The devil tries again. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the inhabited world. “I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.” The devil tempts Jesus to do something to attain glory for Jesus himself, rather than that which would glorify God. The temptation here is to apparently fast-track access to power by bypassing the path of suffering and service, to achieve power for power’s sake. Here again, the devil presents a very tempting “end justifies the means” approach. And we can readily imagine that if this temptation were entertained the means would quickly descend down a slippery slope – “you’re going to have this authority and glory anyway, so it won’t matter if you achieve it through exploitation, domination, corruption, deceit, oppression.... Whatever works...”

But again, Jesus sees through the trap. He recognises again that means cannot be separated from end. He answers, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” I think this response operates on two levels. There is the immediate and obvious response to the condition placed on the devil’s offer – “*If therefore you bow down before me, it all will be yours*”: Jesus refuses to entertain worshipping anyone other than God, the devil included; Jesus refuses to engage in idolatry.

But I think Jesus’ response operates also on a more subtle, but just as important, level. To accept the devil’s offer is to accept his means rather than God’s means; but the command to worship and serve God alone involves the whole of life – heart, mind, soul, and strength; word and action; end and means.

As the devil, and indeed the whole world, will eventually discover to their surprise and humiliation, it is precisely through *not* using the tools of worldly power, it is through submitting to the worst that worldly power can do, that Jesus will achieve victory over evil and will be enthroned Lord of all.

The devil tries a third time. He leads Jesus to the dizzying heights of a pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” The devil is now using Scripture himself. I note in passing that this is a salutary reminder to us that it is not enough to be able to quote individual verses selected in support of our ideas: we should always be reading for context and the meaning and purpose of the broad sweep of the Scripture story and its teaching. Again, this temptation is not about Jesus having to prove himself to be the Son of God. Rather the temptation is to doubt the Father’s protection, to doubt God’s word and promise. The devil’s wants Jesus to put God to the test. We can imagine the devil saying, “Are you sure God loves you? Are you sure he’ll show up to protect you? Are you sure he’s not too busy somewhere else with someone he cares about more? Why don’t you try him out?”

To engage in such a test would betray a lack of trust in the faithfulness of God. So Jesus answers, “It also says, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The devil is defeated.

The devil departs. But the text notes that it is only “for a while”. The word in Greek is *kairos* which often has the connotation of “until an opportune time”. We will see Satan re-enter the story when Judas agrees to assist the high priests in the arrest of Jesus and looks for an opportune time to hand Jesus over [Luke 22:6]

Ironically, it will be in the events that follow that opportune time, events that seem at first to suggest victory for the devil and all the powers of evil, that they will in fact be defeated. This is more than merely ironic, for again it goes to the heart of the means that God employs in the person and work of Jesus.

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There are deep parallels between Jesus’ temptations and the story of Adam.<sup>4</sup>

Adam yielded to the temptation to eat certain foods that he and Eve were forbidden to eat. [Genesis 2:16-17; 3:6] Jesus as the Son of God prized obedience to God over satisfying his hunger and remained the faithful son by *not* eating.

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<sup>4</sup> This discussion is drawn from Garland p.188

Adam was given dominion over the world but was tempted to seize even more and become like God. [Genesis 1:27-28; 3:5, 22] Jesus did not seek power or a kingdom for himself.

Adam was tempted to test God's word that death would come from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [Genesis 3:1-5] Jesus refused the devil's challenge to test his promised safety by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and put God to the test. Instead, Jesus accepted his mission that brought death.

There are deep parallels also with the story of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, their rescue from slavery in Egypt and journey to the Promised Land.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness: Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. Israel too was tempted by hunger, tempted to worship something other than God, and tempted to put God to the test. And the responses that Jesus makes to the temptations are all quotes from Deuteronomy, a book directly connected to the testing of Israel in the wilderness.

Just like Jesus, Israel was tested by hunger, tested in their reliance upon God for what they needed to sustain them. The hunger led them to grumble that they had been better off when they were enslaved in Egypt [Exodus 16]: the hunger had them questioning God's good purpose for them and distrusting God's faithfulness to his promise of a new life in the Promised Land. And then when God provided nourishment in the form of manna and quail from heaven, they were dissatisfied with what God had determined as the means appropriate for sustaining life.

Just like Jesus, Israel was tempted to worship something other than God. When they became impatient with the length of time Moses was on the mountain, they made a golden idol cast in the shape of a calf, and declared "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." [Exodus 32] Again this was not just a matter of worship, but also of ultimate trust and allegiance: would Israel continue to follow the one true God to whom they really did owe their liberation, or would they follow this new god, represented in this golden calf.

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<sup>5</sup> The following discussion owes its essential ideas to Garland, p. 180, and pp.181-183.

Just like Jesus, Israel was tempted to put God to the test. As they travelled in the wilderness they found themselves in a place without water. The lack of water had them asking “Is the Lord among us or not?” [Exodus 17:7]

The story of Israel in the wilderness, the story of Israel’s testing, is the story of the formation of a people. It is the story of a people being made fit to enter the Promised Land among people of other gods; the story of a people being made fit to represent God Almighty to all the nations. And as that story was recited in the generations to follow (as commanded at the festival of the Firstfruits described in Deuteronomy 26 for instance), it was an instrument of social cohesion and identity.

We today need to grow in our deep abiding in Scripture, because it is the history and story that forms us as the people of God today. The Bible reveals to us the work of God in history. It reveals to us the work of God in a story that is ongoing, a story that captures us up within it in the present, a story that gives us a future. It reveals our fundamental identity as children of the living God.

We need to grow in our deep abiding in Scripture because we need this understanding of our history and story to counter the misinformation and disinformation of the powers of evil. Temptation comes in the form of the whisperings of lies and deceptions, of alternative explanations masquerading as the real truth, of twisted facts. Temptation encourages us to believe that our naughtiness doesn’t really matter, that we won’t get caught out, that no-one will get hurt, that something more important is served by wrongful means. Temptation encourages us to believe that we live simply for ourselves, for what feels good for me at the moment; temptation encourages us to believe that this life doesn’t really matter.

We can be tempted too to believe that the moral absolutes we find in the Bible are impossible to attain and therefore have to be irrelevant because otherwise we are all doomed. We fear that if the absolutes are real then we have to provide our own justification in order to be saved, and deep down we know we cannot.

What Jesus did, at the amazing point around which the whole of God’s story with humankind pivots, was to provide the means by which we can both recognise our

inability to be perfect *and* the fact that we can still be saved. As Paul says in Romans 5, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”, and in Romans 10, he himself draws on his scriptural heritage as he quotes the prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”.

American ethics expert Professor Steven Mintz has written that “The reason the means are important, maybe more important than the ends, is how we get to our goal is just as important as getting there. In other words, destiny tells us what we are to the world, but journey tells who we are; it’s the journey that unlocks our potential and establishes who we are as a person and what motivates us towards action.”<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of whether or not we align ourselves with the Wellington protestors’ end or means, their causes and the ways they went about advancing them, the temptations of Jesus remind us that we are called to be people journeying in a completely different way from the ways of the world.

Who are we? We are children of the living God. Our end is the coming of the reign of God; our means is to follow in the costly way of Jesus.

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<sup>66</sup> Steven Mintz, “Do the ends justify the means”, blog article 2 April 2018, <https://www.ethicssage.com/2018/04/do-the-ends-justify-the-means.html>