

9 March 2025

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

There's a really interesting question at the heart of today's Gospel reading, and that is how do we come to know of this event at all? No-one other than Jesus and the devil were present, so it presents the interesting possibility that at some point Jesus recounted the event to his disciples. And that then begs the question of why? And why did Luke then include this in his Gospel?<sup>1</sup>

And I think the answer is not as simple as merely giving us a model to follow as to how we resist temptation.

I think that Jesus would have told this story, and Luke to have handed it on, to help us appreciate that Jesus was not like Superman.

According to the stories, Superman was born Kal-El on the planet Krypton, before being rocketed to Earth as an infant by his scientist father, moments before Krypton's destruction. Discovered and adopted by a Kansas farmer and his wife, the child is raised as Clark Kent and imbued with a strong moral compass. Very early on he started to display various superhuman abilities, which, upon reaching maturity, he resolved to use for the benefit of humanity through a secret "Superman" identity. In the ordinary human persona of Clark Kent, he works as a journalist for the *Daily Planet*, a Metropolis newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was not Superman.<sup>3</sup> Many today, however, including some devout Christians, see Jesus as a kind of Christian version of the character, able to do whatever he wanted, to 'zap' reality into any shape he liked. In the comics and movies, Superman as Clark Kent looks like an ordinary human being, but really he isn't. Underneath the disguise he is all-powerful. But that's *not* the picture of Jesus we get in the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this thought to Sue Fordyce, proffered within the Gospel Conversations video (Michael Godfrey et al).

<sup>2</sup> Article "Superman", Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superman> Accessed 12 Feb 2016, and slightly modified.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph and the two following draw heavily, and often with little editing, from Wright, *Luke*.

In the passage immediately prior to today's reading, Luke has reminded his readers of Jesus' membership in the family of Adam – he has recited Jesus' genealogy. Now if there had been any doubt about Jesus being really human, the fact of his sharing our flesh and blood is found in this vivid scene of temptation. If Jesus is the descendant of Adam, he must now face not only what Adam faced but the powers that had been unleashed by human rebellion and sin.

At his baptism, Jesus was declared to be God's beloved Son. Now, immediately after that event, Jesus faces temptations. And what are they about? They are about the double question of what it means to be God's Son in this special, unique way; and what sort of messiahship would he pursue?<sup>4</sup> The answers to both are not found in the Superman image.

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, 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 this 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 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

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<sup>4</sup> The following discussion of the temptations owes much to Garland, pp. 178-184.

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 would amount to accepting 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.<sup>5</sup>

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>6</sup> Adam yielded to the temptation to eat certain foods that he and Eve were forbidden to eat.<sup>7</sup> Jesus as the Son of God prized obedience to God over satisfying his hunger and remained the faithful son by *not* eating.

Adam was given dominion over the world but was tempted to seize even more and become like God.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Jesus refused the devil's challenge to test

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:6

<sup>6</sup> This discussion is drawn from Garland p.188

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:16-17; 3:6

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:27-28; 3:5,22

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:1-5

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>10</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.

Both Adam and Israel failed to withstand the test; they lacked the necessary steel.

But here now is Jesus facing the test, and proving himself up to the task: he remains faithful to God throughout.

And it is not just this task that he proves himself for: because of his perfect faithfulness to God Jesus is able to complete what Adam and Israel were created for. But he does so, not through adopting the superpowers suggested by the devil, but through powerlessness.

What Jesus did, at what was to be that later "opportune time", 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".

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Why did Jesus tell his disciples about his encounter in the wilderness? It was not just about how we steel ourselves against temptation. It was because the encounter demonstrates what he came to accomplish, and demonstrates how, as the second

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed exposition on the parallels, see Garland, pp. 180, 181-183.

*faithful* Adam and Israel, the radical way he would accomplish it – which was not as a Superman. And it is because he did accomplish it that we can now find the steel to resist the temptations that lure us away from the privilege and invitation to know, love and worship God, and thereby to find and celebrate our genuine humanity, and reflect his image in the world.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wright *Luke, 40-41*