

# A time and place

Luke 4:1-13

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We all have a favourite Gospel, don't we? Some are struck by Mark's simplicity and clarity – others love John's poetry. I confess, I'm a Luke person – so now you know. I love the subtleties, the complexity and the emphasis on the invisible, silent and oppressed voices. Luke's Temptation is one of those passages that wins me over.

To start, in Mark, Jesus is driven into the wilderness, herded like an animal where he lives with the wild animals. In Mathew, Jesus is *led* by the Holy Spirit – taken by the hand as it were – 'to be tempted by the devil'. Matthew states the purpose right up front. In Luke, Jesus is *full of the Holy Spirit* and he was *led* by the holy spirit into the desert **where** he was tempted. In other words – he was moved to follow a calling, coming from within...filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's a bit subtle but in Matthew – the place is not significant – it is the action. In Luke, they are equally important.

The desert is the opposite of the garden of Eden. Place *is* important. For all the people affected by the floods – one day a home; a haven, and the next a mud desert of destruction with no food or water. They were not led to their deserts – disaster struck.

It is significant in Luke that Jesus had a choice – he chose to go to the desert and in doing so, had an experience that clarified his ministry. You could say his beliefs were tested the way we test steel to make it stronger. Sometimes we have to say things aloud to understand them ourselves. He knew all that stuff – but in saying it, he internalised the meaning. The temptations mirror what might experience in the real world.

Last Easter we talked about the Devil – not as an evil spirit but as God's agent – literally, playing the role of the devil's advocate. The agent sent to test people...and here is the perfect illustration. It is easy to read the Temptations – in all the Gospels and hear the voice of a reasonable man. In fact, I was sent a script this week of a dramatic enactment of the Temptation story called "A very reasonable man" and in it the Devil is played by a real estate agent, warm, calm, witty and in a suit.

Fasting is an important tradition at Easter. In the Temptation texts, Mark doesn't even mention it. It is possible, he was fasting from human contact but

he did have the angels with him. In Matthew, the appearance of the devil is after 40 days of fasting – and could even be taken as a hallucination. But in Luke, the link between fasting, hunger and the first temptation is absolutely clear. The Devil is there, watching and waiting. There is a sense that Jesus, like Moses, is in the desert waiting to receive the law from God. The last thing he expected was a different kind of advocate. The story points out that element of surprise. We can be waiting and praying for one thing – and something totally unexpected pops up. Do we recognise it for what it is?

We tend to think of fasting as giving up something we love like chocolate. Last year, in the middle of the pandemic, I said we had already given up too much. If we were going to give up something then make it worthwhile like a bad habit or those extra COVID kilos. Alternatively, it was an opportunity to take up something positive like volunteering or setting aside a special, daily time for prayer.

This year, I'd like to fast from the news and politics. I don't know if that is possible without moving to a desert far, far away. I'd like to give up worry and travel. I'd like to fast from committees for 40 days and come back with clarity in my bones.

Let's just take a minute and think of what we would *like* to give up ....(silence)

And what we'd like to take up as a mission ....(silence)

What does that say to you? Metaphorically, we have been in the desert for 2.5 years – my question is, are we coming out any wiser? Our Lenten journey should be reassessing what is important, who is important and how do I foster that?

There are two more significant differences between Luke's story and the other accounts. The first is in what does kingdom mean. Matthew takes Jesus up a mountain and says he can rule all that he can see. It is a wealthy, earthly kingdom. Luke is much more magical. He raises Jesus up above the earth and compresses time. Perhaps because Jesus refused to use his super powers to turn the stones to bread that Satan feels he has to show off his authority over the natural world. Whatever the reason, it seems like a bigger kingdom, beyond imagination. In the sky, they are omnipresent.

Luke's Satan doesn't ask him to 'fall down' or capitulate – only to worship him. It is simply a realignment, a regime change. Easy. Remember Caesar did not

destroy or directly rule all kingdoms he conquered but merely asked them to pay him homage. In the past, Putin did just that. What made him unhappy was when they chose someone else.

There are other differences between the gospels that I won't go into right now. Let's skip to the end because every ending dictates a different view of the future. Mark doesn't really have a beginning a middle or an end – simply a list of 'facts'. Matthew's addition of, *Begone Satan!* Puts Jesus in charge – already empowered by God to do his ministry. Jesus is stronger than Satan and the angels serve the powerful one.

The ending in Luke is not a defeat but a strategic withdrawal. Satan's work is done, he has administered the tests and chooses to depart but will remain in the background of the Ministry: 'he departed from him until an opportune time'<sup>1</sup>. Satan is never vanquished, ever present, which sits more comfortably with the view of a devil's advocate: an element always available to test us.

In the writings of Matthew and Luke, power is radically redefined. The tests determine how Jesus intended to approach his mission, whether it will be about miracles and magic, grace and humble faith, or political authority, wealth and powerful connections - all of which were familiar leadership models of the day. The differences, although minor make a significant difference in how Jesus is presented. Matthew's Jesus is already divine. Luke's Jesus is filled with the love of God but appears somehow more human.

We are wholly human except that part in which the Holy Spirit dwells in us. And so, we have to make human decisions about how we will undertake our mission. Jesus took time out in the desert to listen. There is a time and place to stop what you are doing and reassess. Lent is a time for that. Don't fast from the things you love – fast from the things you *think* you need that may not be as essential as you think. Lead us down a path of rediscovery and centring on fundamentals. Slow down for the fast and use these few weeks to listen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:13