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In today's lesson from St. Luke's gospel that Lori just proclaimed, we hear how the newly baptised Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and sent out alone into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. Scriptural scholars notice the 40 days parallel the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness on the journey to the Promised Land. One can also interpret this episode in the life of Jesus from a theological perspective, what it tells us about the role of Jesus in our salvation. The Devil, from the Greek word *diabolos* which means accuser, was testing Jesus. Each temptation represents something the Israelites expected that the real Messiah should deliver when he came. Satan's first test was "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Now Luke tells us that Jesus "was famished," but the devil wasn't suggesting Jesus simply help himself to a quick snack. In Hebrew family terms were often used metaphorically to designate groups or categories; the name of the Jewish organisation B'nai B'rith literally means 'Sons of the Covenant'. 'Son of God' was a originally title associated with a descendant from King David, the Messiah (or Anointed One) whose rule would transform Israel into a land of rich soil where even the desert would abound with harvest. Jesus' reply, his refusal to perform the magic trick of substituting a loaf of bread for a stone, quotes the book of Deuteronomy where Moses tells the Israelites that God gave them Manna in the desert to show them that they do not live by bread alone, but by keeping God's word.

The second temptation takes place on a mountain top, where the Devil offers Jesus rule over all the kingdoms of the earth, if Jesus will worship him. This temptation reflects a major theme in the time of Jesus: different Jewish sects disagreed about future Messianic rule: some expected the Messiah to be a powerful conqueror who would make Israel supreme over all other nations and, like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar did for their favourites, hand out choice appointments to his followers when ‘he came into his kingdom’. (You’ll recall how the mother of James and John wanted Jesus to have her sons sit on his right hand and on his left.) Luke’s word translated ‘worship’ literally means ‘bow down’ and it was often associated with serving the gods of the gentiles, as Jesus shows himself clearly aware with his reply quoting Deuteronomy again, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

So, Jesus shows himself neither offering his followers neither wealth nor power, still many people’s most desired objects, and as we see too often in politics, one can beget the other. The Devil’s third temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, “for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On his hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” This incident gives us the proverb that “the Devil can quote Scripture”: actually here he quotes the 91st Psalm, which we’ve just read together and is one of the appointed readings for the night service of Compline – one of my very favourites; I often reflect on it when I am anxious or afraid. I’m rather ticked off with the Devil that he should try to abuse it. But isn’t that what Satan does, encourage us to misuse good things for evil ends? Jesus’ reply, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test,’ refers to a story in the book of Exodus, where the thirsty Israelites in the desert threaten to rebel against Moses’ leadership and make Moses must demonstrate his authority by striking a rock and water

gushes forth. And God punished the Israelites for doubting his promises, as God says in Psalm 95, as the old translation has it: “Forty years long was I grieved with *this* generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, who have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.” The first generation of Israelites were condemned to perish in the wilderness and only their children allowed to enter the Promised Land, not even Moses himself, because he yielded to the popular demand for a miracle.

Thus we see how each of these temptations corresponds to a contemporary widespread but false expectation regarding the Messiah, and we can imagine why both Saint Matthew and Saint Luke chose to add these three temptations, which Saint Mark omitted. And I doubt it’s a coincidence that the temptations occur at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry; unknowingly Satan forewarns Jesus of the scepticism his message will face.

Long ago in another life, I had the privilege of teaching the Bible as literature at the University of Iowa, and one of my memorable and delightful students was a young Jewish woman who asked me why Jesus wasn’t accepted by everyone as the real Messiah. Hoping I had my wits about me, I ventured what I hoped was an interfaith answer, “Because lots of people there thought he didn’t fit the job description.” In today’s gospel lesson, Satan is like the worst sort of Human Resources officer, obsessed with checking the right boxes rather than finding out your real qualifications for the job – in Jesus’ case Saviour of the fallen human race.

What specifications do we aspire fit? Probably not for most of us here, wealth and power. But what about our social expectations? Do we worry about how others feel about us? I know I do. Many of us are obsessed with projecting what the mystic Thomas

Merton called 'our false self'—the image we try to put on to impress others, the person we want to appear to be, whom we create on our resumes and want to come through in job interviews and attract followers on Instagram. So, self-denial is a big part of my personal plan for Lent, but not in the usual sense of 'giving something up for Lent' – at my age there aren't all that many indulgences left anyway. Rather, I'm endeavouring – and I urge you to do as well – to get rid of those aspects of our lives that prevent us being the persons God wants us to be, which of course is that is another way of saying, who we really are. Unfortunately, it requires persistent effort, which is why we have Lent every year. At the end of today's gospel lesson, Saint Luke says, "When the Devil had finished every test, he departed from him till an opportune time." It's as if Satan were saying, "You fooled me this time, but I'll be back." The 'opportune time' translates a key concept in Greek, the *chairo* – the critical moment. Let each of us try to be ready for it when it comes.