

Eaglehawk
17/2/13
Message by Bronwyn Jones

Ephesians 6:10-18
Luke 4:1-13

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and traditionally this scripture about Jesus' testing in the desert is used on this Sunday. Lent is meant to be a period of self examination and what was going on for Jesus in this time was a real struggle of the soul.

Jesus had just been baptized. This was the beginning of his ministry and his ministry was reconciling the world to God. Even though Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit, at baptism the spirit came down upon him, affirming who he was, but then drove him out into the desert for this time of struggle. The struggle was – how was he to carry out his ministry. The wording used here indicates that this wasn't something that Jesus thought might be a good idea – the Spirit within him was so strong that he had to go. He began a 40 day fast. This is serious business. A forty day fast should never be undertaken lightly. But why fast? Fasting is not about earning brownie points with God, fasting has the ability to clear our minds and enable us to feel closer to God. Jesus wanted to give his best in this struggle, not just do it half-heartedly.

After the forty days he would have been crystalizing in his mind what the important issues were and these became the temptations. Firstly the temptation to use his power to provide food from the stones around him. This was a very real temptation because he could have done it and he would have been very hungry, but what was at stake here? Jesus had the power of God to do the work of God, the temptation here was to use that power for his own gratification. No-one would have known that Jesus had done this because he was alone in the desert, but he knew that this was a wrong use of the power he had. The power he had, was to be used to bring glory to God. This is what he did when he healed people, fed the five thousand and stopped a storm. To use it even once for the wrong purpose was not the way to go. There was more than Jesus' own hunger at stake here. Our lives need more than physical food, and the spiritual food is more important.

The second temptation was to achieve what he came to do but to do it by compromise. Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world, which is what he came for. The only condition was that Jesus bow down and worship Satan. His answer to this was very definite – God is the only one worthy of worship.

The third temptation was to leap from the top of the Temple into the valley below. This would have been a death-defying leap, but scripture says that God would send his angels to bear him up. We read that in the Psalm for today. This would certainly have drawn people's attention to Jesus and given them some sort of proof of who he was, but Jesus saw behind the flawed thinking. It is not right to put God to the test.

So what can we take from this?

Firstly. This time of struggle came to Jesus after what must have been a spiritual 'high'. He went from there into isolation and struggle because it was so important for him to be clear on how he was to carry out his ministry. There are times when we have a real spiritual 'high' and then everything seems to go wrong. It isn't that God has abandoned us, but more likely is testing us so we can see past the emotion of the 'high' and see what is really inside of us. Think of Peter the apostle. When Jesus told them of his approaching death, Peter vowed that he would die for Jesus, and I'm sure that he meant every bit of it. But a few hours later Peter was to be tested, and before he realized it, he had denied knowing Jesus to save his own skin. That's what shattered Peter. He realized that what was uppermost in his heart was self-preservation not his loyalty to Jesus. At this point Peter learnt something about himself which would make him stronger in the future. He realized that no matter how much his heart may desire to do something, he didn't have the strength in himself to do it. Thus Peter knew in future that only the Holy Spirit could give him the strength he needed. Peter became a bold disciple because he learnt where true strength came from.

But what about the actual temptations? The first one was about the wrong use of power. For us it is about how we use the gifts God has given us. Every one of us has a gift that God has given us to use for his purposes. It may be an upfront gift, or it may be a behind the scenes gift but each is just as important. The question is whether we really use these gifts for the work of God or whether we use them for ourselves in some way. We may be the upfront musician leading worship and using our musical gift for God, but we may also like the status it gives us, or the compliments we get about our playing and are these more important than leading people into worship and giving glory to God? We may be the one who always cleans up the kitchen and is last to leave making sure that everything is put away clean for the next group. That's great, but why are we doing it? Is it to simply serve others, or do we have a need to be needed. Most of us will have a mixture of these issues within us, that's why we need to continually check out our motives and hand the wrong ones up to God.

The second temptation was to achieve what he set out to do, but to compromise. How are we tempted to compromise? Do we tell a lie in order to keep the peace? Do we use a little dishonesty to get a good result for our boss? Peace is a worthwhile outcome, but at what cost? Getting a good result for our boss is a good outcome, but at what cost? Are there areas of our lives where we compromise the truth or our principles to achieve our end?

The third temptation was to put God to the test. This is both a lack of trust in the promises of God and it is also trying to manipulate God for our own ends. We do this if we live an unhealthy life style, eating too many fatty foods, drinking too much alcohol, never getting any exercise and staying out late night after night, then when we develop a heart condition or diabetes we say to God. "You are the God who heals- heal me." I remember a couple talking to me once and saying how in Malachi 3:10 it says "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." What their issue was that they had been tithing and they weren't receiving great abundance. What was their motive for tithing? Was it to bless God, or was it to receive lots from him? I think it was the latter. It was an attempt to manipulate God - no wonder they weren't receiving. Do we try to manipulate God in any way?

Each of us has a part to play in God's big picture. God has gifted us for the part he wants us to play. We need to examine our lives – are we really living for God or is self the centre of our lives? The process of the Christian life is to become more and more like Jesus. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 3:18. We are being changed bit by bit into the likeness of Christ. There is no instant perfection. All our life should be a process of change, handing up the things of self and letting Jesus take centre stage. In other words we need to be serious about living the life God wants for us. Jesus left nothing to chance. He faced the things that could have derailed his ministry and he defeated them. We need to be serious about facing the things which could derail us – the temptation to use our gifts for self, the temptation to compromise our beliefs and the truth of Jesus and the desire to manipulate God in some way.

What is the best way to do this? Notice that Jesus used scripture to defeat each temptation. Even when scripture was used as the temptation, he knew it well enough that he could see that Satan was twisting or misusing it.

You may wonder why I included the reading from Ephesians about the armour of God. This is a picture Paul uses to show us where we stand in Jesus. If we have given our lives to Jesus then we belong to Jesus. Holding on to this truth protects our minds against the lies the enemy tries to tell us. Are you really a Christian? Does God really love you? Etc. The truth of our belonging is like the helmet protecting the head.

The breastplate protects the vital part of our body. On the cross Jesus exchanged our sinful nature for his righteousness. He has given us a covering of his righteousness – free to us, but costing everything for him. God sees us as righteous –that is, as right with him. We do not have to earn our place with God, Jesus has given it to us.

The belt of the Roman soldier was a vital part of his uniform. It held everything together and also held his sword. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. The belt of truth represents a life based on the truth of Jesus. This is the only truth that will hold our lives together.

The Roman soldier wore sandals. Paul sees these as representing the gospel. The sandals had many straps going up around the ankle. This meant that the soldier's foot was held firmly and there was no danger of his foot slipping within the sandal on rough ground. They also had cleats on the bottom to give them a firm grip because things could get a bit slimy underfoot. But they were also light so that the soldier could move quickly when he needed to. This is how our relationship should be with the gospel. We need to wear it firmly in our lives, not just have a loose attachment to it otherwise we may fall when things get rough. We need to stand firmly on the word, but we also need to be prepared to move quickly to spread that word wherever needed.

The shield was the soldier's main protection. Paul is suggesting that it is our faith. The truth is that God's promises are always true. If we hold on to these promises by faith we will avoid many difficulties and anxieties. The Roman shields were also able to be locked together to form an impenetrable barrier in front of them or over their heads depending on where the threat came from. We are not Christians in isolation. We are members together of God's family and we are to support and strengthen each other.

The final piece of equipment was the Sword. Paul uses this as picture of God's Word. God's Word has power. At creation God said 'Let there be light' and there was. Isaiah 55:11 says "So is my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Hebrews 12:4 "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." The word of God is a powerful weapon to use in any situation. There is nothing magic about putting on the armour of God, it is simply a picture to remind us of where we stand in Jesus, but knowing where we stand is a powerful weapon in overcoming the things that would tempt us and derail us from God's plan for us.