

IDENTITY THEFT FOILED

Luke 4.1-13

It's the first Sunday in Lent and round we come, yet again, to the story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. If some of us are honest, we realise we could easily drift off right now, feeling, 'Been there, done that, got 27 tee-shirts to prove it!'

I assume you expect me *either* to encourage you to take yourself in hand a bit - to give up some relatively minor 'bad things' (sugar in drinks, being a couch potato, too much alcohol, staying on social media too long) or, alternatively, to encourage you to do a little extra on the 'good' side (a bit more time each week trying to pray, getting to church on Sunday mornings in time to clear away Saturday night's litter from the grounds, eat more vegetables, walk 10,000 steps daily, be more patient with your whingeing neighbour and so on).

But I don't think that Luke included this story in his gospel to encourage us just to be *a little bit* more disciplined. What's this story doing in Luke's gospel in its particular context?

I'll try and explain by I telling you about my youngest son. He's spent his life working with marginalised people overseas, and for the last two years as a Devon bus driver. At the end of last year, he applied for a research job – and to our delight got it. The team with whom he's now working knew where he'd come from, they were impressed by his CV, but had no idea what he was *really* like, until he sat down in the office, started working with them and began to reveal his inner self to them.

We could say that Luke's given us Jesus' family tree, filled in his background, and presented his CV. He's made sure we know that Jesus's arrival on the scene is the culmination and highlight of a family tree filled with of the heroes of the faith.

Now Luke invites us to look under the surface and to discover what this Jesus is really like inside. No one else was there in the wilderness with him recording what happened there. Jesus was alone. And so this story *must* have originated from Jesus himself, when the time came when he had friends he trusted enough to share it with.

In the wilderness testing, we're privileged to be allowed a totally honest glimpse into the workings of Jesus' mind. We don't often come across people who are honest and share what's really happening which makes this story very special. It's the opposite of how we portray ourselves on social media. There's that glamorous 'selfie' - not a hair out of place, in glorious sunshine, on an exotic holiday and intentionally we appear faultless and perfect. And the sad thing is that we do this intentionally. We don't want to be seen 'warts and all' - we get the warts airbrushed out of the picture.

In the story of his temptations in the wilderness, Jesus presents himself totally differently. He didn't present himself as the powerful, kingly, long-awaited Messiah. He shows us himself as he really is - a man who's struggling - a man longing to find an easier way out, than enduring the terrifying agony lying ahead for him.

I feel bad if I've gone just two days with no human contact. But Jesus had just had 40 days stuck out on his own in the middle of nowhere - I don't know how he managed it without caving in. Surely, after that 40 days, he could be gentle with himself and find an easy way of convincing everyone he was who he was supposed to be. What were his options?

To start off with, he was famished and vulnerable. Perhaps he could kill two birds with one stone - get himself a delicious meal and feed all the people at the same time. That ought to do the job!

The words flashing through his mind went something like this: 'Seeing you're the Son of God, just magic-up a meal for yourself and the others?'¹ The Greek words 'if you are the Son of God' are in a tense that isn't questioning *whether* Jesus is Son of God, but rather asking, 'Since you're this person *how* will you carry out your God-given calling?' Easy solution - magic stones into bread?! Quick and impressive! He didn't fall for that one.

In the second testing, the word 'if' is slightly different - it's a conditional 'if' word - like me saying to a 5-year-old grandchild, 'If you play quietly in church, then I'll give you cookie'.²

Jesus looks out on the entire world and inside himself he faces the temptation of what (on the face of it) seems to be a good and easy way of

¹ The devil says "If you are the Son of God ..." This if (*E?*) is not hypothetical, nor is it a kind of short-hand for "whether," but more like "since." (internet)

² The "if" of this temptation is a bit different: it is a conditional if (*Ean*) that operates like "Grandma's rule:" "If you do X, I will give you a cookie.'" (internet)

gaining power. 'Just ditch God, follow the devil and, literally, the world's your oyster!' Jesus doesn't fall for this one.

Finally, Jesus's mind explores the possibility of doing something *really* sensational. So sensational that people would have to wake-up and realise how exceptional he was. What could be more dramatic than hurling himself off the summit of the Temple, and landing unscathed at the bottom – no bumps, bruises, or fractures – that would prove he's the Messiah, and he'd avoid the years of painful struggle lying ahead. Amazingly, Jesus doesn't buy this one either.

I reckon that in this story, Luke (the gospel writer) isn't really trying to deal with the commonplace temptations you and I face. I think that he's highlighting Jesus' unique calling by God, and the fact that the wilderness temptations were to test the calibre of the man who had come as Saviour of the world. We are privileged to be allowed to see inside his heart.

So, I think we miss the main point when we use this just to think about our personal struggles *not* to do the fairly ordinary things human beings shouldn't do. This story is about something far bigger.

I think it can challenge us to be more aware of the ways in which deliberately or thoughtlessly we move away from our relationship with God and our wonderful identity as God's children.

You could say that Luke's version of Jesus' temptations is a story about 'identity-theft'! We all dread this happening to us – someone else discovering and stealing our personal details, pin numbers and pretending to be us. In today's story we see the devil is thwarted in his attempt to steal Jesus' true identity as God's Messiah – and to make him out to be someone else.

There are times when each one of side-lines God and goes over to the other side. Our relationship with God is weakened when do this, and our true identity as God's child becomes blurred.

Think about the all advertising we're immersed in. Its aim is often to make us feel inadequate. It's coupled with an implicit promise that if we buy, or do whatever's advertised, then our insecurity will disappear and we'll be outwardly flawless. But it's the inside that really matters in God's economy. But, God has already assured of our truest identity. We are totally acceptable to God as God's children, 'warts and all'. Yes, we work towards becoming more like Jesus but we are acceptable and unconditionally loved, no matter what state we're in.

God loves and values us just as we are. God knows us inside out, but how well do we know ourselves?

During the coming six weeks of Lent, I'd like to encourage each one of us to explore what's really going on inside. Some of us prefer to do this alone. Others need to find a handful of people with whom to be really honest.

The question I'd like us to think about during Lent is, 'Are we following God *really* to the best of our abilities or do we get half-hearted and allow ourselves to be sidetracked. How serious are we about following God? 100% or 63%?'

Perhaps you'll join me, in honestly reassessing what is, or isn't, going on between you and God. Then our Lent resolution might be to try, as best we can, to give God top priority.

Together, let's give it our best shot!

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