

## What kind of messiah? Out of the wilderness

The Jesus we never knew x06 VPBC 5th Feb 2017

### Matt 4:1-11

Continuing our theme for this year “the Jesus we never knew” **we come to the place of wilderness.** Matthew and Luke give us the fullest accounts. We sometimes think of these as “temptations” and link it to moral issues, but the bible has a word for this, and it is actually used quite sparingly. It is not the word used here. It is more about the **sense of “test”.** **Character tests. These are best seen under conditions of hard ship.**

We have gone on a short journey over these last few weeks from the Jordan river to now being in the wilderness. Of John’s baptism where people needed to be washed and ready for the Messiah, which was just around the corner, who would be bringing in a new role, and a better baptism, that of the Holy Spirit. It would be a time both of judgment, and of rescue- salvation. **Jesus is commissioned by John, in an act of solidarity in identifying with the Jewish people and our humanity** that he is uniquely positioned to undertake this role as Messiah (King David’s greater son), in kingly authority, as the Son of God, but also the suffering servant. We thought about how low key Jesus inauguration was compared to some more recent examples. But also, just how deeply significant and important it was.

**The Spirit, descended humbly with gentleness, as a dove in acknowledging as part of the Trinity - as well as the Father acknowledging the Son - the embrace of mutual love in community.** The Spirit now sends Jesus into the wilderness where he is tested. Luke makes the point that he is tested throughout that period, and it culminates in these three direct challenges. Both make the point that the tests did not end in the wilderness but that Jesus conquered each of them. Luke and Matthew change the order of the second and third tests as they look to draw different emphasis from the way they tell the story- but both agree that the **first challenge is one of bread.**

When we read “*If you are God’s Son, order these stones to turn into bread*” the sense of the challenge is not so much to prove you are God’s Son by doing this miracle but rather since you are God’s Son you can do this. So, the accuser is willing to admit that Jesus has the power to do this, that is not in doubt. **What is being tested is the way power is used and for what ends.** So, what is being tested here is just what kind of Messiah is Jesus. What is the character of this kingdom that is being brought in?

Of these character tests, we are going today to look at just one of them. Bread in the wilderness. Yet they are all linked. **Is Jesus about Empire or Kingdom? How do things get done when God in Jesus is in charge?** Yancey, in his book “the Jesus I never knew”<sup>1</sup> linked it to three headings. Miracle. Mystery. Authority. What and how would this power be exercised, extended and maintained? Just how different would it be from the

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<sup>1</sup> Yancey P *The Jesus I never knew* Zondervan 1995

rule of the Herods? The Romans? What clues from Israel's past would help to give confidence that this was indeed God's promised rule removing and displacing and then replacing what they already had? What would it look like? What could they expect? Just how reliable too is the past as a guide to the present and the future in understanding just what and how God is at work in bringing change and hope to a people who badly needed both.

**Jesus in his rebuttals of these challenges draws from the writings of Deuteronomy where Moses gives a series of talks to the people of Israel in the land of Moab (still in the wilderness)** where they had stopped before shortly to enter in and occupy Canaan. He appeals to them to remember, to bring to mind, how dependant they have been on God to get them through it. Both in provision and protection, leading and guiding and to remain loyal and obedient to God in faithful devotion to God alone and what it practically means to keep the covenant that God has entered into with them so that *"they will be my people and I will be their God."* (Jer 32:38) . It is a call to renew commitment and those obligations. Then the commissioning of Joshua, of which the name of Jesus means the same thing, into being the next leader of God's people. Joshua was a warrior. The taking of the land involved great bloodshed, destruction and violence. Just what kind of leader would this new Joshua/Jesus turn out to be?

The first challenge was about the role of how guarantees of safety and security, of the new freedom God was bringing, would be obtained. God heard the cry of the Israelites and their oppression under people of empire. In this case the Egyptians, and sent Moses. He initially used violence and murder to bring freedom but had to flee and work in a despised occupation (sheep farming) before **in the wilderness God met with Moses again. It is in the wilderness stripped away of all forms of normal dependencies and distractions that Moses spends forty days and nights (twice) on the mountain as Elijah did later in the desert.** Moses gave the law, Elijah restored it, the Messiah will perfect and renew it. **Moses fasted at the middle, Elijah at the end, Jesus at the beginning of his ministry- but only Jesus was tempted by the Devil.** For the Devil began proposing some enticing improvements. For Jesus to embrace the good points of being human without the bad. To eat and taste bread without being subject to hunger and of agriculture, to face risk with no real danger. To enjoy fame and power but not a cross. In this [short clip](#) is a depiction of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness which carries some of these kinds of subtexts of what lay behind these temptations.

Now it is true that manna (what is it?) was provided in Israel's forty years' wanderings in the wilderness without the use of agriculture. Yet this miracle did not in itself encourage belief gratitude or loyalty. Indeed, the wilderness wanderings were a result of continued lack of trust, lack of obedience, lack of devotion. Indeed, in Deuteronomy 8:2 Moses tells them "God led you on this long journey before the desert these past forty years sending you hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do." The

bible talks about Jesus as the Second Adam in 1 Corinthians 15. The first Adam was a created living being, but the last Adam is the life-giving spirit. It is Jesus, as the second Adam that through his sinless life of obedience opens up the way of salvation. Here too, whereas the Israelite failed to live a life of obedience, loyalty and devotion, **that Jesus now demonstrates what it means to be the “true Israel.”** This is not by grasping but by serving. Although Jesus has the power, he meekly chooses not to use it. Of not performing miracles and using power without morality, where the end justifies the means- even to a good and legitimate need. In this case hunger. This is the character test of the “suffering servant.” To embrace as Paul describes in Philippians 2 a life that has learned and surrendered to obedience. A suffering servant

*“He always had the nature of God*

*But did not think that by force*

*He should become equal with God*

*Instead of this of his own free will*

*He gave up all that he had and took*

*The nature of a servant*

*He became like a man and appeared in Human likeness*

*He was humble and walked the path of obedience*

**Jesus rejects the power of empire. The enslavement of others in order to obtain, maintain and sustain control over lands and people’s lives. He is also our perfect High Priest, tested in every way but without sin.** Would that the church in its history have learned some of these lessons? Partial quoting, or misquoting, of scripture has justified all kinds of horrors and tyranny’s. In the Inquisition the invitation to the banquet that Jesus uses as parable where the master tells the servant in Luke 14:23 “ *Go out to the country roads and lanes and make people come in* “ became the reason for a byword for despotic terror and cruelty. In this case to track down heretics, or what the church regarded as heretics, on the testimony of just two anonymous witnesses to burn and torture people.

In the novel by the Russian author *Dostoevsky “the Brothers Karamazov”* he imagines Jesus being caught and interrogated by the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor rebukes Jesus for turning down the use of miracles, mystery and hierarchical authority as a means of exercising religious power and a hold over people’s lives. Instead of taking possession of people’s freedom he increased it and made it far too easy for people to reject. “Did not Jesus realise that people want more than anything else to worship what is established and beyond dispute?”<sup>2</sup>. So, for this reason the Inquisitor executes Jesus one more time, lest he hinder the church’s work.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid p74



In this picture from the same period is a painting from the Russian artist Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy “Christ in the wilderness.” He depicts a Jesus that could reflect the sorrow known to all people. He painted not a Christ with beautiful, peaceful face, but a desolate figure in a stony desert, crouched in the cold with the blue light of dawn breaking over his shoulder. It is the face of an ordinary working man.

The tyranny of the Tsars gave way to the tyranny of the Soviets with ideals of equality, sharing, justice and racial harmony. But written in blood and maintained by an iron grip on power.

**What kind of Messiah then? A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. In Isaiah, we read of the suffering servant**

*He had no dignity or beauty to make us take notice of him*

*There was nothing attractive about him*

*Nothing that would draw us to him*

*We despised him and rejected him*

*We ignored him as if he were nothing.”*

*Yet “he endured the suffering that should have been ours*

*The pain that we should have born*

*.... because of our sins, he was wounded, beaten because of the evil we did.*

*We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received.”*

**What is the point of encouragement, warning, challenge, hope in this incident of the place of testing?** When we are at our lowest point, not our strongest. Jesus in his prayer asked that we be kept from hard testing and to be delivered from evil. What is it in our (ordinary) lives that ends up not loving by God’s word but relying on ourselves? It isn’t up to us or in our power to make bread out of stones. Or to create the miraculous draught of fishes, or extend the small lunch of a boy to a banquet of thousands, or turn

water into wine. **Is it the place of restraint? How we choose to depend or not depend on God to meet our legitimate needs.** Jesus was hungry. It was God who led him into the wilderness, to the place of need and necessity. It was not out of disobedience that Jesus was in the wilderness among the wild animals but in a place of obedience. A stony, rocky place. Far from shops or a means to earn a living, or receive the help of friends or family. For a season, it was of loss and removal where the things we thought we could rely on had now been removed from us, or denied to us. There is therefore a starkness in the desert. A place of no frills. If it is a place of freedom, it appears freedom only to be hungry. In need. But still in relationship. **It is easy to trust God when things are going well, when we have full stomachs and bank accounts. When we are healthy and popular.** How easy is it when we face trial and difficulty? Jesus was tempted in every way but without sin (Hebrews 4:15) as our perfect "High Priest," able to present and represent us to our Father. He understands the pull and the weight, the tension to do what is wrong in the deserts of life, but also knows how to come alongside and help us overcome the things that would defeat us. It is when we are in difficulty it is often precisely those times when it really exposes what and who we can really rely on. Therefore, how we respond helps illuminate what we are like. However long, or recently, we have been following Jesus we still have a history, a past. We can go back to that, the ways we learned to cope and behave then, or we can grow into the new future that God is preparing for us as his children. To learn to trust God for the immediacy of the now.

***"Man (or all human beings) cannot live on bread alone, but needs every word that God speaks."***

But we need to think and reflect on this. **What makes us different from anyone else around us?** Not just as individuals but as a new people that God is in the process of forming and encouraging one another as followers of this Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, yet also the suffering servant? That has the hallmarks and identity of his kingdom? Jesus reply to the temptation to simply do what was in his power to do as a legitimate satisfaction of his own needs was to set aside those rights and **go back to testing not what just to put in his stomach but what was in his heart.** Who was he at heart? Who was he faithful to when it was in his own interests or not? Do the ends justify the means? Jesus reply as we have seen was taken from the book of **Deuteronomy 8:2** ***Remember how the Lord your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years sending hardships to test you, so that he might know what you intended to do and whether you would obey his commands. He made you go hungry and then he gave you manna to eat, food that you and your ancestors had never eaten before. He did this to teach you, that man must not depend on bread alone to sustain him, but on everything the Lord says.*** Now there is a whole range of ages here some more in excess of forty years than others. Some of you are just about to hit the 40-year mark, for others that seems an impossibly long way off. But you don't have to be forty before you have experienced hardships. It is particularly in those places of hardship, where our faith is being tested that the test

helps illustrate the strength of that faith. Indeed, we may be facing difficulties because we are trying to do the right thing to remain faithful to what we believe and understand. Or if we had stayed at home, where we were safe and secure and had our meals, as it were, regularly and reliably put on the table there is now uncertainty and insecurity. In the face of that who do we trust? **Lean on me, says Jesus. As I have learned to lean on my Father in heaven.**

**How can the unlearned go and learn?** We learn from *Matthew 11:27*?

*“My father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one the father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him: come to me, all of you who are tired of carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest. For the yoke, I will give you is easy and the load I will put on you is light.”*

**Part of that “rest “is finding freedom to trust rather than the fears that drive us.** We use our past and our present in the cultures we live in to achieve by grasping and controlling by what we can do to make things happen so that our needs are met first and foremost. Then when we have enough we might then be ready to hear what God wants us to do but not before. **Trust is not laziness but learning reliance.** It takes seriously that we live in a world with real needs and lacks. It is not that we simply expect either God to magic it into place or we make it happen but to find that place of freedom not to grasp but to serve. Not just to look to our own interests but the interests of others. God does and can provide and we do need to work but **it is what we seek first that is important because of what we are trusting in. It is the difference between Empire and that of the Kingdom.** As we shall see next week as we look in detail at the next two temptations as to just what sort of Messiah this Messiah Jesus really is. Of not just who he is but what he is like and how God’s kingdom rule will work in a world of human beings as it was then. Yet given it is an everlasting kingdom how now might it challenge the way things get done in our world today? Do we fall into the same traps as in the past? Or do we have the confidence in God’s word to learn to live differently and be prepared to listen to what it is God has to say whether we, at this precise moment, think it is in our best interests or not?

**This is an upside-down kingdom but it is knowable, and discoverable. Particularly in those wilderness spaces and places of our lives where despite the absence of bread we can find rest for our souls and learning to trust the God who provides. It is a testing place but it is also a worthwhile place discovering grace in the wilderness because God’s grace is sufficient for you, for me, for us.**

