

3 If you are the Messiah ...

In all the gospels, the adult Jesus first appears at the Jordan river where John, the son of Zechariah, was preaching and baptising, a message and a sign of repentance for all Israelites. A hundred years before his time, the writer of the first Book of Maccabees seems to have been conscious that Israel lacked and was waiting for a prophet.¹ It was centuries since the great prophets had spoken, and the nation needed someone to declare to them the present will and time of God. And now, here was John, appeared in the wilderness in a way that reminded people of Elijah, calling them to a change of heart, or repentance. John was talking about the kingdom of God and the imminent arrival of the Messiah, and to prepare for that coming he called on the nation to return to the laws of God and to the justice and wholeness that his covenant had set before them.

We should not have in mind the very individual and almost private repentance of many Christian revivals. John's message was, in line with the history of Israel's prophets, one of national renewal, a return to the faithful observance of God's law thruout their personal, social and political life. (He would be executed soon for including the Roman-backed royal family in his demands.) Israel was facing a time of strict and searching judgement, when the coming of the Messiah would be like a woodcutter's ax striking into the dead wood of their society. The rotten tree would be cut down and thrown away. The rubbish would be burnt like unwanted chaff after the harvest.

Many people came to him from all the area around, and listening to what he sed, offered themselves to be baptised in the water as a sign of repentance. Among the others, Jesus too came down, but on this occasion John sed no. He thought he recognised in Jesus someone greater than he could baptise, someone with the authority to baptise the baptiser. But Jesus reassured him: it was right for him to be baptised by John like everyone else. That was how God wanted it to be. It was the only argument Jesus used or needed with John: "This is how we shall fulfil the perfect will of God."

To "fulfil the perfect will of God" could have only one meaning for Jesus or for John: complete obedience to the law of God, which was not a list of petty regulations, but the whole expression of God's just order given to Israel to be the permanent foundation and frame of their society. In this act of repentance and baptism Jesus and John would carry out the command God had given, and Jesus would begin his work by responding with his people to the call to repentance. Whoever and whatever he was to be, he would be that in complete solidarity with Israel, the people now called to change their ways and return to the ways of their God.

It is customary for Christians to interpret the baptism of Jesus as a generous fiction. Jesus was sinless and did not need to repent, but submitted to this act of repentance in order to identify with sinners. That is a half-truth, and unfortunately the half that doesn't make sense on its own. God never indulges in fictions, even the most generous ones. Jesus' baptism and repentance were real, for it was the repentance of

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Israel, and all who would be true Israelites were called to share in it. He did not identify himself, and God did not identify him, apart from his people. That kind of thinking, the way of European individualism, was foreign to Israel's and to Jesus' way of thinking. Repentance was called for from all of Israel, as a nation that had not been faithful to the ways of God, and in his baptism Jesus affirms his identity with Israel. He is not to be defined over and against Israel, but as a true Israelite repenting with them and returning with them to God.

So Jesus was baptised, and when he came up from the water, the very heavens were opened as God set God's seal upon the deed. The Spirit of God came down upon him like a dove descending, and God proclaimed:

This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased. (Matt 3: 17)

It was a messianic declaration, for "Son of God" was a title of the Messiah. But if Jesus is the Messiah he is the Messiah attested by the free, untrammelled gift of God's Spirit. John did not anoint Jesus, as prophets had in the past anointed kings¹, and Jesus is commissioned by the gift of God's Spirit, that comes only and directly from God. We are to understand the authority of Jesus as the authority of one in whom God's Spirit is breathing, whom God attests as God's Son, able to act in God's name with God's full authority.

The words we translate "love" and "well-pleased" have a meaning drawn from the Hebrew scriptures² of the one who is chosen and entrusted with the task of carrying out God's will in this world, who therefore acts with God's authority. The sovereign ruler entrusts to the one who has his complete confidence the commission to rule in his name. If Jesus is the Messiah, this may have been the moment when he realised it, but if it was, or if he had so understood before this, I believe that it was not with some unchanging divine certainty, but as a human experience of learning, growth and increasing self-knowledge. I do not think that Jesus' knowledge of himself was immune to the questioning, uncertainty and step-by-step discovery that is the way of human self-knowledge whatever moments of sudden insight and bright illumination may burst thru from time to time. The knowledge remained open, as human knowledge always is, especially at the start, to questioning and challenge. Is it really so? and anyway, if he is the Messiah, what then?

The Spirit that came upon him in that moment of revelation did not cushion him round with reassurances. Rather, it took him out into wild, dry places where he was cut off from all the normal comforts and supports. There he fasted for forty days, and of course he was very hungry. The wilderness offered nothing for a hungry person, only dry, inedible scrub, sand and stones. He was vulnerable, and the time had come for him to endure the questioning and testing of hostility. The devil, the voice of all evil, would probe him and see what kind of stuff he was made of.

"If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into loaves."

The evil that really tests is the evil that seems reasonable and good. Being tempted to break the moral law or the agreed norms of behaviour is a light temptation – you

¹ I Sam. 16: 13; I Kings 19: 16 ² Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 42:1, 49:3

agree or you refuse. But the subtle temptation that comes as a good or even necessary idea, that seems to be backed up by fair reasons for acting so - this sort of temptation searches out and tests deep-lying values, attitudes and convictions that are not often exposed.

Jesus has been spoken of as the Son of God, the one whom God has specially chosen, in a unique relationship to God, as the Messiah who will rule in God's name. And here is the Messiah, if that's who he is, hungry to the edge of starvation. There is nothing to eat and the desert will give him nothing. So what could be more appropriate than to take his food from God? There are no limits to God's power, and no limits to what the Messiah can command. "Have these stones turned into bread, then you can eat." Now, at the end of his fast, he must provide for himself, and here is the means. His bread will come from the power of God. Surely it would be an affirmation of his belief in God, to invoke God's power in his need.

Jesus rejected the temptation:

"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The question is not whether Jesus needs food or whether he is entitled to feed himself. It is whether the power and the authority of God's chosen One are given for the benefit of himself. And Jesus knows they are not. Neither he nor any other person lives by food alone. They live in their relationship with God. Listening to God, hearing God, they are nourished – that is the nourishment on which they all, including the Messiah, must depend. The one who is come to nourish the people on God's word has all his power for that purpose, not in order to meet his own needs. Jesus himself may need bread urgently - and the day would come when he would multiply bread for his followers who needed it – but the work of the Messiah is not to meet the needs of the Messiah.

We take it for granted that leaders will be well rewarded for their skill and their work. It is understood, even where there is little corruption, that leaders have needs and are entitled to the standards of comfort that their ambition may aspire to. At least, that's the case with political power. Where it is commercial or professional power, the power to organise profit, or the possession of skills that are in demand, there are, it seems, no limits. It is accepted that such power will provide for itself first of all, and we have even come to respect it for doing so, in the belief that where the powerful succeed in looking after themselves there will be all the more spilling over and trickling down for the rest of us.

The theory asserts that wherever the skilful and powerful are allowed to look after their own interests, everyone, even the poor, will eventually benefit. It takes to an extreme the idea that leaders should have the perks of their position, and makes the pursuit of perks, of selfish financial gain, the very condition and purpose of successful leadership.

But it is a pattern of leadership and power that Jesus rejected even in its most reasonable form. Not even the simple bread for which his body hungers is to be acquired for himself as the fruit of his power.

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So the devil transported him to Jerusalem and set him up on a high parapet of the temple.

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for scripture says: He will put you in the care of his angels, who will hold you up on their hands. You won't even stub your foot against a stone.¹

If the Messiah has come, and if his power is for the people, the people need to know. It shouldn't be kept a secret, but widely and arrestingly publicised. If you're going to save the people, you have to get their attention. And where better to do that than at the very centre of their world, the temple at Jerusalem? How better to do it than by an unmistakable entry? It would guarantee that everyone knew.

Even scripture can make the tempter's case. But Jesus knew that scripture also gave the answer:

“You must not put the Lord your God to the test.”²

God's promise is not a tool for forcing God's hand. That God has given his word is not an invitation to exploit it. It is an assurance to those who follow God's leading, not an opportunity for those who think they can oblige God to follow their leading. And the Messiah will be God's obedient Child, not an ego to exploit God for promoting himself.

Publicity is essential. To get the public's attention you have to advertise, and if you need to get it in a big way, if you are offering yourself as their big leader, the chief, you have to advertise spectacularly. Publicity puts you on the map, so display: visible, colourful, arresting, has to be your first objective. In American politics, the “primaries” serve two purposes, one to select in a democratic way the party's candidate, the other to make that spectacular, unmistakable splash that will fix the winning candidate and his party in the public mind as paramount leader. In Britain we recently saw a new Labour government throw itself and a vast amount of money into a spectacularly expensive millennium project that would come to fruition just before they had to face their next election. Whether it's bands and balloons in America or the Millennium Dome in Britain, it's government and leadership by spectacle.

And what could be wrong with that? If you're going to lead the people they must know you, and know that you are the leader. It must stand out for all to see. The king must wear a crown and the bishop a mitre. Presidents and Prime Ministers must have the media interested, or they cannot function. They cannot possibly hold the nation's attention or take the nation with them, if the nation isn't looking. And you've got to use the resources you have to get that attention.

¹ Matt 4:6 quoting Psalm 91: 11 – 12 ² Matt 4: 7 quoting Deut 6:16

The Messiah has resources. He will have all the power of God behind him and has only to show it. Whatever he does, God will uphold him. The very scriptures Jesus has just quoted would tell him this. And what better or wiser way to capture the people's attention and fix it firmly on himself, than to descend from the top of the temple in the hands of God's angels?

But Jesus did not seek an attention that would only lock them into astonishment and admiration. He must win something much harder to secure: openness for a new understanding of God. A leader showing off, however spectacularly, would be nothing new and would only confirm the people in the ways they were already used to. Attractive tho it might be, Jesus rejected the pattern of projection and manipulation that we have made essential to modern government. The spectacular and astonishing may get attention, but the Messiah, like God who sends him, will be looking for commitment. The power of the Messiah would be his standing with God, but not even his standing with God was for display – or not this kind of display.

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So the devil resorts to his third temptation. He took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain, from which he could see all the splendid kingdoms of the world. They would be given into his hands, on one condition: "I will give you them all, if you fall at my feet and worship me."

Jesus might achieve the Messianic purpose without any possibility of failure. Total control would give him total freedom to bring about all the changes necessary. Otherwise, he could spend a lifetime, even with God's help, working and planning and dragging people into position, just to get started. The devil would by-pass all that, would give it all to him, to go to work on at once. It made crude sense of a sort, because the Messiah does indeed come to rule the world, and if there is a hard way, and an easy way to that end ...

But Jesus had already unmasked the tempter:

Get lost, Satan! Scripture says: 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'¹

At first sight, it seems preposterous that Jesus, or anyone who had resisted and exposed the first two, subtle temptations could now fall for this crude invitation into the camp of evil. But it isn't as wild as it looks.

If the struggle is real, it drains you. You have faced up to and endured the pressure of temptation, you have brought yourself to renounce in all its attractiveness and plausibility the obvious way to go. If the issue isn't theoretical, but you feel the hunger in your very body; if you see and understand the brilliant possibilities of your power, only to forgo them and continue hungry and unknown; if you burn with ambition, a message to communicate, and find yourself renouncing the obvious and easy way to attention, renouncing it for who knows what paths of frustrating and frustrated effort, you may well, in the end, feel resentment that you have had to make

¹ Matt 4: 10 quoting Deut 6:13

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that choice. You have seen the easy and assured way and you have rejected it for the right way. But if it is like that, if the right way is the hard way of renunciation, letting all your opportunities and rewards go unclaimed, then why not throw over the right way and just go the wrong way anyway?

The battle against temptation, the subtly dressed up invitation that appeals even to your sense of moral good and deserving, is exhausting. You don't often come thru it feeling like a conqueror. There can be, after you've won the battle and rejected the attractive lies, a bitter sense of defeat. You've had to kill some of your most obvious needs and best intentions, to stay on the right path. It is remorselessly hard, and often the final temptation is: "If it's that hard to pick your way thru right and wrong, why not just go for the easy way? Why not just do what is obviously wrong, if it gets you where you want to go, and the right way is so perversely difficult?"

I'm not surprised after all that the final temptation is the crude one. It matches my understanding of human experience that Jesus would, after exposing and renouncing all the attractive approaches to power, have been left with a sense of emptiness that would be tempted to abandon it all for a straitforward pact with evil. If good is so alien to human nature, then why not a pact with the devil, especially if the devil delivers?

But Jesus sent the devil packing. He renounced the most universally accepted means and prerogatives of power – and still chose the way of God, when there would seem to be nothing left in it for him. His last answer to the devil is in fact the fundamental value and imperative of all his life and mission:

“You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him alone.” (Deut 6: 13)

To worship is the fullest expression of value. The one you worship will hold your loyalty and govern your actions, because here, above all, is what you really love. For the Messiah, all value is in God alone – the one God who had revealed himself to Israel as their God, the one whom they should worship as the value and focus of all their being and the ground of their identity, the God who would be everything to them:

“You shall love Yahweh your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.” (Deut 6: 5)

God is the great value that will govern the life and mission of the Messiah, for he comes to rule and to save Israel and that will be done only in the worship of God. Neither himself and his own needs, nor the following and admiration of the people are his goal. But not even the task he has come to do is his ultimate value. That ultimate will be God alone and everything else will follow from there. The devil's way is rejected, not because Jesus knows a better one, but because God alone is the One to be sought and valued and the only way is the way God sets before your feet.

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Much has been thought and said about this story of the temptation of Jesus, for it is rich in meaning, pregnant with truth. It is an amazing story, even by gospel standards,

for it has the fullness of a myth worked out over many generations, yet, unlike myths generally, I don't know that it has any parallels. Nor is it like the other gospel stories of Jesus, where he goes about in public or at least with his disciples who might witness and report on events. This story has a fantastical, mythological character – you can't even imagine anyone being there and seeing it happen. Did Jesus talk to his disciples afterwards about his temptations – and did he describe them in this way? Or did someone else cast them in this striking story form?

However they came to be known, they are before all else the story of the temptation of the Messiah. Tho because of their depth of insight they teach us a great deal about temptation in general, they don't depict any and every temptation. They have a very specific focus and context.

“If you are the Messiah ...” The question is, what is power all about; what is it for? What is the role of the one who has power? What is the Messiah's power about? For that is the power which is to rule all powers and to give them any validity they can ever have.

The test and challenge for Jesus was how he would exercise power, and his answer to the tempter was decisive: he would both seek and exercise power in obedience to God, his ultimate value and rationale and the One who gave him his power. He would live from God; he would trust in God; he would worship God. That is the rationale and exercise of Messianic power.

The story does not tell us about the temptation to do wrong as we ordinarily understand wrong, to steal, slander, commit adultery and so on, tho it may open our eyes to the most common reasons why people succumb to those temptations. Rather it tells us about the temptation to use our “own” power to meet our own needs and objectives, which is an apparently innocent, and some would say laudable, activity.

We are not the Messiah, and we do not (apparently) have the powers and responsibilities of the Messiah. But the story is not here so that we can be mere onlookers to the Messiah's struggle. In fact, we will find that nothing we see or hear or learn of the Messiah will reach us as mere onlookers. It will encounter and challenge us, it will engage us as believers and followers, it will come to us as the interpretation of our own lives as well, commanding our obedience. If it does not, then it is not the Messiah we are seeing. If we remain mere onlookers, nothing will really have reached us and we will fail to recognise the Messiah.

The story of Jesus' temptation forewarns us of a challenge we have to face with him. If we recognise the Messiah and find ourselves called to follow him, it won't be only a matter of obeying the moral rules (which are fairly universally recognised) but the way of God will present us with further real and specific choices. We will face alternatives in which we may follow or turn away from the Messiah's road, not by choosing or rejecting what is wicked, but by either discerning and faithfully following the way of God or succumbing to very ordinary, reasonable and acceptable patterns of “doing our own thing”. As we come to know the Messiah, we will find ourselves drawn to follow him, and, if we do, we will find that all the circumstances of our lives have a new imperative upon them: that with him we are called to be faithful to the purpose of God and not to our own (even good) purposes.

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The story of Jesus' temptation exposes a temptation that always threatens our integrity as his followers. This is not the temptation to break the moral rules but the subtler temptation which only suggests that we live our lives by the normal, acceptable rules that "everyone" recognises, advancing ourselves and meeting our own needs by the resources that properly belong to us. For many of us it will come most clearly in our work or career, where we have the ability to secure, from the gifts and skills that are ours, commensurate income, standing and influence. Outside of any Messianic context, that is the way to live. Provided we do so honestly and fairly, and remembering to share from our good fortune "with those less fortunate than ourselves", then we are good people, leading good lives.

But if ever we recognise and begin to follow the Messiah, there will be more to it. We all of us have powers: our personal talents, the opportunities provided for us, the circumstances of our life and our position in society, our education, our skills, our income and our spending power, our particular bit of leverage in the economy. These are our powers and opportunities and we normally expect to use them for carving out our own future and meeting our needs. We are all the more sure of this in that we live in a comparatively egalitarian and meritocratic society. Our chances in education, in getting a job and getting on, seem to be – give or take a bit of luck and dis/advantage – dependent on our own skills and diligence. All the more reason why we should believe that whatever skills and whatever power we have to achieve anything, are our own, for us to use in our own legitimate interests.

The religious idea of a "vocation", a calling to put our time, skills and talent at the service of God, is restricted to a few professionals: clergy or members of missionary organisations or religious orders. The majority of us are said to have "secular" careers in which it is right that we make money and further our own prospects. We take it for granted that "the labourer is worthy of his hire". We aspire to a job where we'll make more money, and if we move in our work, we will move for promotion, to go to a higher salary. Success in our career brings its rewards, and reaping these rewards we can do a lot of good – not only for ourselves and our family, but for others who may come in our way. That is surely good news. Being a success in our chosen career is an example to others and gives glory to God (as long as we haven't badly neglected our family or stopped attending church).

But the coming of God's rule with the Messiah is the breaking thru of new opportunities to be seized and new possibilities to be realised in a quite different direction, and to try and assimilate them into the familiar patterns of normal life is to fall short of the call. We tell ourselves that the new way of God is not very different from the normal working ways of making money and getting recognition, or that it falls into the small corner of our lives that is not already taken up with those pressing and important pursuits. I follow Jesus with the time and energy I have left after I've paid the mortgage, and after I've put in the extra hours that are necessary to the realisation of my career. For with the skills and privileges I have, I also have needs, and I can't prioritise other people's needs until I have met my own. It's quite legitimate from a normal moral point of view, but to go this way is to yield to Satan's prompting and become spoiled followers, as surely as Jesus, if he had yielded, would have been a spoiled Messiah.

The temptation is to use our skills and resources, legitimately, but with ourselves in the foreground, for our own benefit first of all in salary, profit and status. (It's made to feel less selfish because "our own" is usually translated as "my family's". The mortgage that makes me a slave to someone else's profit is to maintain the home that meets my family's needs and expectations. The career prospects to which I dedicate my best energies – even to the neglect of my family! – are for the sake of those who depend on me.) We are tempted to consider that whatever we are called to do in the name of the Messiah, it will take its place in the space left when we have earned our living and committed to our upward social and professional mobility the time and energy they require of us. We end up living as if the Messiah, in our lives, is an afterthought – a ruler to be followed with the left-overs, after we have properly honoured the primary purpose of our time and talents.

It's not an issue of morality or of law, but of our response, when we recognise it, to the reality of the Messiah. Our temptations then are like the temptations put to him at the outset of his mission. Only in the context of God's greater commission do they stand as temptations – but in that context they are serious, deadly to our part in God's work, to our following the Messiah and sharing in his mission. They are deadly because they are otherwise innocent: they obstruct only the vision and the purpose of God.

It's not a question of something being right or wrong, moral or immoral, but whether we too will follow the Messiah. If our works are all making money and raising our status, can they be the work of the Messiah? The fact is that all but the poorest, in our rich, developed nations, have more than enough for their needs and their comforts, and while earning our bread and developing our careers will be a blessed and fruitful part of our lives, it should be part of our lives only, and most probably a minor part. If we follow the Messiah he will teach us that much more of our productive activity should now be free, to flow away from us, not expected to earn anything or promote any of our own interests.

For most of us, because we live in a wealthy society where all of our natural needs are easily met (tho we mite be surprised to hear it) to discover the Messiah is to find a way and a commitment that identifies the larger part of our time and resources as surplus to our private needs, and to have the question put to us: What is this surplus of skill and energy for? If the Messiah has any reality for our lives, the pressure to take what is the normal course in our society, letting our time and energy, our kind of power, be absorbed in the business of money-making and career building, will be unmasked as a temptation, a diabolical distraction from the following of the Messiah.

And of course, there may be other similarities. Some of us may find ourselves, like him, actually on the road of public power, aspiring to teach, to change, to rule. Possibilities will open out before us: ambitions to achieve and honor to attain. Followers of the Messiah mite also become leaders, and if they do, they will find that the temptations sprung upon them, when both their need and their opportunity are most immediate, come very like the Messiah's temptations indeed.