

Bread and Stones Meditation on Matthew 4: 1-11

The story of Jesus in the desert is an attempt to answer human questions about the basics and the seriousness of our faith.

To begin with, we find a simple description of time: "Then – Jesus was led up by the spirit into the wilderness"... And before this, something else important had happened: Jesus had had himself baptised by John the Baptist.

an act to show the public which life Jesus would want to lead and which God he believed in. And the public understood: this was totally and entirely the Son of God.

"This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now in the story of the temptations this is to be found out: whether Jesus is really the Son of God according to God's will. And it is not only Jesus who is focused on but you and me as well.

Are we daughters and sons of God? And if so: What lives are we living? And which role is God playing in these lives?

In Jesus we are asked to look at our lives and at ourselves. We are asked to think about decisions we make, and conflicts and temptations which we face.

In Jesus and the story of his temptations we are urged to reflect on our individual approach towards questions of bread, trust and power.

How would we decide?

In Jesus and in his decisions, we realise, who we are meant to be. Free and independent human beings; children of God allowing freedom and dignity to ourselves and to others.

Bread – trust – and power...

Three basic decisions which from the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew influence Jesus' entire way of acting and living. His journey does not lead to standard heights of human success and career but goes right through the depths of earthly life, where suffering, pain and fear must be experienced.

Not the golden age of joy and well-being is lying ahead of Jesus but the path of suffering and powerlessness towards the cross. Not human wishing and longing is satisfied, but freedom is presented that lies way beyond our human striving.

The figure of the devil in the story of course offers another way to Jesus: wealth, honour and power... The path of suffering and sympathy could be exchanged for a life of triumph and might. Jesus then would no longer spread the good news of the Kingdom of God; he would no longer represent God's inviting love and attracting modesty; he would no longer represent non-violence, but could function as a role model for those with strong fists, and obsessed with power.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert takes place after a long time of fasting...

Why are you hesitating? the devil asks. If you really are what you believe, the Son of God,

why don't you just make and take what you need to live on? Just look after yourself and take these stones and make yourself some loaves of bread! You can do it! Do what is good for you.

This is what devils say – not only in Jesus time...

But we have heard Jesus answer:

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

One does not live by bread alone...We need more: we need the closeness to God, the touch of friends, the love and comfort of others and the encouragement of our fellow Christians.

Such can satisfy our hunger in life!

Jesus' second temptation on the pinnacle of the temple faces another basic aspect of human life, a nerve where we are open to be attacked.

Offer an impressive performance to people, then they will believe in you, the devil suggests.

And by doing so he approaches everybody's secret desire for outstanding excellence. Jesus was asked to prove that he is the man according to God's will by throwing himself down from the temple without hurting himself, without damage or pain. Again, Jesus resists. Jesus refuses to join the competition of the strongest, greatest and best, who can only win their victories because the losers pay the price. His way of humbleness, powerlessness and suffering is so different from the obsessive wish to be brilliant, outstanding and free of pain. Even when he is asked to climb down from the cross, to free himself and end his own and God's pain he refuses to do so. Right to the end Jesus remains on the path of powerless love.

After all that one would think, he has gone through enough. But nevertheless: devils don't stop here. Jesus is challenged by a third temptation. It is the question about power and influence.

Even if we are willing to share our bread and trust our God... Let's be honest: what happens when it comes to giving up and renouncing personal power and important influence?

Wouldn't we all love to be a little bit more important and have slightly more to say? Hardly any of us like to leave decisions to others, step back or even withdraw from a position we have already achieved.

How do we deal with power and influence? In church? In society... in politics? In our jobs and with our families?

"All this I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." That is the devil speaking. The evil is revealed in its total claim to destroy. And we are waiting, holding our breath and listening to Jesus' answer: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Only him... Again Jesus resists.

Jesus denies all power that makes others into servants. He denies richness that makes others poor and control that makes others powerless! Jesus' entire living and talking of the Kingdom of God is aiming towards human life in freedom and fullness. His power can only be shown in taking people seriously, in reconciling and healing, in showing sympathy and allowing closeness, in helping people to live upright and in dignity – as daughters and sons of God.

To serve only God... Jesus himself is the best role model of a son of God who took on the challenge: who did not turn stones into bread, who trusted God only and who chose the way of service rather than power!

If we do the same, we might stand there with empty hands, powerless but open to really meet our fellow human beings and the living God.

Such a decision is always a risk. It can make life uncomfortable and lonely, but it can add clarity and hope to our lives, that make us feel ever so close to God.

Deserts times always wait, ready for those who come, ready to let us know who we are. And while we fear the loneliness, the emptiness and harshness we must never forget the angels, who come when God sees that we need their help. Amen.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Jesus:
for not turning stones into bread,
for not jumping off the temple roof,
for not being the wonder boy.

Thank you, Jesus:
for not accepting the golden crown,
for not taking authority over earthly kingdoms.

Thank you, Jesus:
for choosing the way of service
rather than domination,
for choosing the long, slow road
rather than that of instant solutions,
for choosing loyalty to your Father's Kingdom
rather than personal acclaim and approval.

Thank you, Jesus:
for facing hot and cold,
good and evil,
life and death,
yes and no,
forty days and forty nights.

Thank you, Jesus:
for showing the evil the door
and make us free to face our wilderness decisions
with greater vision and courage.
Amen.