

Encounter with Jesus 1: The Evil One

Matthew 4:1-11

In 1968, the Rolling Stone released a song that caused a great deal of controversy. It was called *Sympathy for the Devil*, a title guaranteed to cause outrage, not that the Rolling Stones minded one bit. However, if you listen to the song closely, it's not particularly sympathetic to the devil, but rather unmasks his evil agenda.



Some of you here today will no doubt remember 1968. It was a bad year. It witnessed the assassination of two significant figures in American history, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. It was the year that Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Russians, and American soldiers massacred 347 civilians at My Lai. Students and workers rioted across France.

But there have been many others bad years stretching across history. And the same sorry story is being written this year. A war in Afghanistan. Civil war in Syria and South Sudan. The invasion of Ukraine even this week. What lies behind this violence, disorder and chaos, both at the global level, but also at a local level? And not just local but personal, and even more insidious than that, within each one of us?

Back in 1968, the Rolling Stones sang, and will no doubt sing again in Melbourne this year:

*Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith.*

There's no need for introductions. We know from our own bitter experience who this is: the devil. And we know his methodology: Jesus describes his as the thief who "comes to steal, kill and destroy." To steal life and hope, and replace with a pseudo-life that promises the world but delivers nothing. To kill off the future that God has planned for his creation. And to destroy God's good creation. His destructive mission is focused in on Jesus, God's Son, who has stepped into human history and whose intention is to rewrite the story of our brokenness and disobedience with a new and hopeful ending.





We meet Jesus immediately after he has been baptised. He did this not because he needed to repent, but as a sign of his complete and total identification with those he came to serve. As Jesus is baptised, the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove, and he receives the affirmation of his Father for the task ahead of him. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

But as soon as these words are spoken, the same Holy Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness, the wild space where it was believed evil



lurked, and where people were sorted out and tested. It was in this same wilderness that the people of Israel, on their circuitous journey to the land promised by God, were tested again and again, and found wanting every time.

The devil appears on the scene as Jesus is at his most vulnerable: hungry and spent after a 40 day fast. Matthew gives the evil one three different names, which encapsulate the breadth of his evil work. The first is the tempter. The tempter wants to know where Jesus' loyalty lies. Can he tempt him to cross over to the dark side? The second title is diabolos, from which we derive the English word diabolical. Diabolos describes a person who is prone to slander, slanderous, and falsely accuses people. The third word, Satan, comes from a Hebrew word that means adversary or enemy. That's quite a combination of destructive characteristics, and the Devil brings them all into play.

He asks Jesus three simple questions through which he seeks to undermine his trust in his Father and his commitment to his mission.



First question: “Since you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” “Jesus, how about taking some shortcuts? Sure, you trust God, but aren't you hungry. Just say the word and your hunger will be satisfied. After all, your Father fed his people in the desert. Why isn't he feeding you?”

Jesus has a retort, straight from the mouth of this Father. “People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus hungers and thirsts for God and his righteousness. That's all that matters.

The devil's a quick learner. If Jesus can use the word of God, so can he, hopefully to mould Jesus like putty in his hands. He takes Jesus to the highest point in the temple and invites him to jump off. “Come on, Jesus. You know what will happen. Doesn't God say that he'll launch a rescue mission of angels to grab you before you hit the ground?.” Does God really care? Flush him out.

But the word that the devil uses to trap Jesus can only be understood against the backdrop of a relationship of trust. “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.” To make God prove himself would make a lie of the trust that Jesus has in his Father.

There's a third test, one which we who live in a culture based on the exercise of self-serving power and the acquisition of material things find the hardest to resist. In one crowded moment, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. "You want all of these? [And who wouldn't?] There's an easy way to get them. Just throw yourself on the ground in front of me, and worship me. It has to be easy than the path ahead of you."



There can only be one answer that comes from Jesus, an answer forged in prayer and obedience. "Away from me, Satan! for it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"



Jesus succeeded in rebuffing the devil's testing, but the evil one doesn't stay away. Jesus' ministry is characterised by the constant presence of evil, in the demon possessed who confront Jesus, and in the constant opposition to his message. And it even surfaces in those who have committed to following him. Peter doesn't understand the necessity of the cross, and tries to talk Jesus out of it. Jesus' reply is so strident because so much is at stake: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

None of us should dare judge Peter. We know full well how often we allow human concerns to overtake the concerns of God. How many times each day are we placed in the position where we have a clear choice to make? Do I do it God's way, or my way? These may seem very small, even inconsequential decisions; do I allow my frustration with that person to erupt into a corrosive burst of anger? Do I pretend that I didn't hear that request from my spouse, or my child, or a friend, to help them out? Each time we fail to respond in love we allow the evil one a foothold in our lives. It's no surprise that Peter himself should say to us, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith."

To resist we have to look to Jesus. His temptations came to a head in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Stones put these words in the Devil's mouth:

*And I was 'round when Jesus Christ
Had his moment of doubt and pain
Made damn sure that Pilate
Washed his hands and sealed his fate.*

These words refer to Jesus' agonised wrestling with his mission in the Garden of Gethsemane. "My Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me." You may remember how the movie *The Passion of the Christ* captures this scene. We see the indistinct silhouette of the devil, as Jesus speaks with his Father and seeks his strength. Pilate did wash his hands of Jesus, and with that sentenced him unjustly. But this was the way that divine justice played out. Satan wants to destroy us exposing us to the full force of God's wrath. But God circumvents this by pouring out his holy anger on his Son, Jesus. God's masterstroke stops the devil in his tracks. God, in his all-out commitment to us, sent his Son to oppose and remove the darkness of our sin, and the



