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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

In the 1990s a movement arose among Christian youth in particular, first in the US and then around the world, made most visible in plastic bracelets bearing the letters WWJD. “What Would Jesus Do?”

At one level the slogan represents an excellent guide to life. We are called to imitate Christ.

But the slogan on its own is not enough. The temptation is to quickly and without thought read off the surface of the Gospels about what Jesus did, and assume that we must do exactly the same. But what Jesus did was done within a particular context: the context of time, place, and culture; and most importantly, the context of that particular age in God’s dealings with humankind. In effect, before we can answer “What would Jesus do?”, we need understand WJDI “Why Jesus Did It”.

We can so easily think of the account of the temptations of Jesus as being primarily about his *example* – his example as one who was able to resist temptation and thus remain without sin. And we are then quickly pushed on to a moral lesson about how we should store up scripture passages to help us resist the evil one.

But there’s much more here that we need to understand.

Let’s get straight into Matthew’s story.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

It begins “Then ...”. When? The *when* is important.

So we look back and see that this period of temptation occurred right after Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan by John, right after everyone had heard the voice from heaven saying, “This is my son, my beloved. With him I am well pleased.”

God’s declaration of Jesus’ sonship, God’s call on his life and his love for him, is immediately followed by this period in the wilderness. After Jesus has fasted forty days and nights, the devil strikes using the lever of the word God had given him

immediately beforehand: “*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*”¹

The tempter tries to sow a seed of doubt. “You’ve been told you’re the Son of God. Well, then, if that’s true, surely God can’t want you to go hungry when you have power to make food for yourself. Come on, demonstrate your power! Use it for your own benefit! What kind of god sits around listening to his stomach growl instead of showing off his power and feeding himself? What kind of king ever goes hungry?”

And, it seems to me, there is a dangerous additional note to the temptation here. The temptation is not just to misuse his power. The temptation is to doubt the word spoken by God. Here I am, hungry. Might the heavenly word at my baptism have been wrong, or just my imagination? Am I truly loved?

In other words, might Jesus, in his hungry state, feel he has to try to turn the stones into bread in order to prove to himself that the word from heaven was accurate?

In response, Jesus places himself not among the privileged few but among the ordinary people of God. A human being, he says, “does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. For Jesus, being the Son of God means accepting his humanity and depending on *God* for daily bread.

His reaction to this temptation in no way suggests that food is unimportant, or that earthly needs do not matter. Jesus has in fact quoted from Deuteronomy² which is part of a larger passage that describes how God provided for all of Israel’s physical needs during their forty years in the wilderness. During the exodus, God’s children doubted God’s provision; but Jesus as Son of God models human reliance on God for food, for strength, and for life itself.

For Jesus, being the Son of God means total trust in God, total trust in the faithful God who is true and who keeps his promises. Jesus does not need to doubt the heavenly word, because it is the word of his Father in heaven. Jesus can therefore be confident in his identity.

¹ Much of what follows is drawn with a little amendment from Jones.

² Deuteronomy 8:3

After his first failure to lure Jesus into misusing his status, the tempter tries again, taking him to Jerusalem, to the very highest point of the temple. There one looks straight down into the ravine of the Kidron Valley, a dizzying experience. This time the tempter challenges Jesus to prove his identity by throwing himself down and letting the angels rescue him. “If you’re so dependent on God,” he seems to say, “why don’t you take it a step further? You trust God to feed you. Do you trust God to protect you from harm?” Perhaps there’s also a temptation to use this as a showy display of God’s power and protection.

Then the devil takes a page out of Jesus’ book, quoting Psalm 91 to suggest that if Jesus jumps, he will merely be demonstrating his utter confidence in God’s promises. But Jesus rebuts him with another quotation: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”, again from Deuteronomy.³ Once again the context of the quotation enriches its meaning. In Deuteronomy Moses is reminding the people how they tested God at Massah, when after God had already fed them with manna, they grumbled that God was planning to kill them with thirst.

What kind of faith doubts God at every turn and insists that God must do one miracle after another? By contrast, genuine faith means trusting that the One who called the people out of Egypt will see them through to the end of the journey.

In the final temptation, the devil promises to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if only Jesus will worship him. The implications are stunning. The devil assumes that all authority in the world belongs to him, to give to others as he chooses. But Jesus orders Satan to leave, saying, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (once again from Deuteronomy⁴).

Jesus has come not to rule Satan’s kingdom, but to proclaim and to bring in the reign of God. After the resurrection Jesus will receive all authority in heaven and earth, but it will be *God’s* gift, not Satan’s.

The biblical texts Jesus used as his key weapons help us to see how this story fits into Matthew’s appreciation of who Jesus is. They are all taken from the story of

³ Deuteronomy 6:16

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:13

Israel in the wilderness. Jesus has come through the waters of baptism; Israel had crossed the Red Sea. Jesus now had to face, in forty days and nights, the equivalent of Israel's forty years in the desert. But, where Israel failed, again and again, Jesus succeeded. Here at last is a true Israelite: that is the implication of what Matthew has recorded. Jesus has come to do what God always wanted Israel to do – to bring light to the world.⁵

But behind that story again is the even older story of Adam and Eve in the garden. Adam and Eve received a single command; they faced a single temptation; and there was a single, devastating result. Jesus kept his eyes on his father, and so launched the mission to undo the age-old effects of human rebellion. He would meet the tempter again in various guises: the tempter protesting to him, through Peter, that he should change his mind about going to the cross; the tempter mocking him, through the priests and bystanders, as he hung on the cross – again with the words “if you are God's son”.

When Jesus refused to go the way of the tempter he was embracing the way of the cross. The temptations were designed to distract him from his central calling, his vocation, the path of servanthood that would lead to suffering and death. They were meant to stop him from carrying out God's calling, to redeem Israel and the world.

But they were sneaky temptations. Because they weren't – at least the first two weren't – targeted directly at Jesus' calling, his purpose in life. They tackled him indirectly in terms of the *means* Jesus would employ. WWJD?

And contrary to all the other means at his disposal, all the “normal” worldly means of self-gratification, exercise of power, and showy display and so on ... contrary to all other ways, the way Jesus went about inaugurating the reign of God for all the world was the way of the cross.

⁵ This and next two paragraphs largely from Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p.26.

The big point to take away from Matthew's story is that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and that therefore he was going about God's work of rescuing the world in God's way, not in man's way.

Along with the WWJD bracelets, other bracelets were often worn effectively answering the question of "What Would Jesus Do?". FROG: "Fully Rely On God".

So what about us?

I first want to just briefly go back to one of the points I touched on at the beginning. The use of Scriptures is important in what happened between Jesus and the tempter. But Jesus didn't "win" because he had a verse available to throw out each time one was thrown at him. On the surface there was nothing wrong or inadequate with the verses the devil employed. Jesus won because his texts, the points he was making, and his very life, were completely consistent with the larger story – God's purpose. Too often I find people in a debate will throw out a text triumphantly like it's the trump card in a game of 500. We so readily take a text, a truth, and twist it to a self-centred purpose. But the proper question is, how does it fit with the whole of Scripture, the overall story of God's purposes?

The next point is more fundamental. Just as Jesus faced the challenge of the *way* he was going to exercise his calling, so we need to examine *how* we conduct ourselves. As I said last week, it is not that the end justifies the means; the choice of means *matters*. We are called to walk in the Jesus way, the way of the cross, the way of self-sacrificial love. And that applies to everything we do – in the way we relate to one another within the church, the way we make decisions as the body of Christ, the way we conduct our family life, the way we relate to the world outside the church.

A related point is this. We live in a culture where the means usually employed are usually far from the way of Jesus. We are deeply immersed in that culture, most of us have grown up in it, we are bombarded by it. And this applies as much to the Church as a whole as it does to each of us individually.

So how do we reform our means? One way is by observing spiritual disciplines. (I talk a bit about this in my article in this month's Messenger.) Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, chastity, solitude, silence, reading and study, etc, are helpful in training our bodies and minds wherever our appetites and attitudes are getting the better of us.

And Lent is a good time to do that. Its period of forty days is intended to remind us of the purification of means that Jesus went through as he was tested in the wilderness.

And finally, whether or not we succumb to temptation, or whether or not we observe Lent faithfully, is not about our salvation. We cannot earn salvation; Christ has done that for us – but we do need to be attentive to the way we work out the implications of our salvation and the quality of our saved life. It is all about following the way of Christ. Jesus was assured of God's favour – "This is my Son, my beloved; with him I am well-pleased" – and then went on to live out of the implications of that. In the same way we need to have confidence in our calling, our adoption – "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"⁶ And then we need to live out of the reality of that.

God loves us and has declared that we are not just acceptable but also treasured, priceless beyond measure. We need to cling to that truth, and resist the lies of the tempter who would tell us that we are not enough, not good enough, not successful enough, not likeable enough, don't have enough...⁷

We are beloved children of God. We need to live in a way that demonstrates that that is true for us, a way that invites others to share in it too.

That's what Jesus did.

Amen.

⁶ 1 John 3:1

⁷ See Brown, pp.18-30

Sources:

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