

2. Or if he had taken on the Kingdoms of the world? Then Jesus would be numbered amongst the great warriors who achieved their ends with cruelty and vengeance, and whose bones lie mouldering somewhere in the dust.

3. If Jesus had attempted the spectacular? Perhaps history would have recorded a self-deluded prophet whose end comes after attempting to fly off the temple. Or if he succeeded, perhaps a few miracle seekers would follow for a while, and then tire of the spectacular and go elsewhere.

But Jesus said no to the short cuts that would have been short cuts to false fame and glory. He chose instead the path of the Suffering Servant. The way he chose was one that was the long journey of loneliness, pain, love and personal sacrifice. He said “no” to the world’s way and “yes” to the path to which God had called him.

This is his example for us as we seek to follow Christ as our guide for living. There is no “*short cut*” as far as commitment is concerned. We might get away with it in exams, our cooking or our golf. But if we are the Body of Christ we are called to walk with Jesus the same path of love and sacrifice. If we are the people of God, we are called to avoid the short cuts to commitment and follow the way of the Master.

May we know joy and blessing in our journey!

AMEN. THANKS BE TO GOD!!

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A Message from Mark! **Taking a Short Cut**

21 February 2010 - Lent 1

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:1-13

One of the hobbies of lazy students is to do a careful analysis of previous years’ exam papers and to calculate which questions come up with constant regularity, which ones appear in a “rhythmic pattern”, and which areas have rarely come under the examiner’s scrutiny. Personally I’ve felt the beautiful, warm and smug feeling in an examination room when research has paid off, where you have easily passed a paper by taking “*short cuts*”. I have also felt the feeling of panic when those short cuts have almost led to failure.

We all do it. A busy mum, halfway through baking, discovers she needs self-raising flour and only has plain flour. Taking a short cut and avoiding another shopping trip, she wonders why the result seems more like rock cakes than the light fluffy delights her mother used to make. The short cut across the paddock turns into a hurdle over muddy puddles. The short cut over the rough to the green usually ends up as a disaster hole. Too often short cuts do not achieve the desired goal.

Jesus had a mission

Jesus had a mission that was going to bring him in costly contact with people, to be confronted with hostility, to be unfairly tried, and to die an agonising death before the goal had been attained. We see in today’s gospel the Tempter comes to Christ and suggests that all of this nasty business of hostility and pain can be avoided. “*You want to be the Messiah,*” he suggests, “*let’s take a few short cuts*”.

I don't know how you picture the bible scene. You may imagine a gaunt, prophetic figure wandering around accompanied by a little man with a forked tail and horns, whispering in Jesus' ear, "*Let's take a short cut*".

I don't see it like that. I see this Biblical scene as a time of decision, a time of reflection, a time to sort out exactly what is the will of God. In amongst the isolation and deprivation the inner voice continually provokes, "*There is an easier way.*" The tense of the Greek verb for "*tempting*" suggests that the whole process was a continual one - not confined to any one event.

"Turn these stones into bread"

Jesus would have felt like one of those families where mum or dad has decided that it's time for a weight loss program, and everybody else can go on a diet too! The New English Bible says that Jesus was famished. However this temptation was more than attempting a miracle to satisfy personal hunger. You want to be Messiah by popular vote? Turn stones into bread. Satisfy peoples' physical needs. Feed them! Clothe them! You will win them forever, but it doesn't work like that. Jesus did feed the multitude, but once he started developing the meaning of his message and applying it to people's lives, many packed it in and left him. The crowds had believed time and time again that any leader who turned stones into bread was a leader worth following. This is the basic premise of Marxism; when there is a classless society, when the workers are fed, then Utopia will arrive. What a mistake that has been. The so-called Utopia has been a regime that has mixed terror, repression and the crushing of human rights.

Easy Bread and Morality

This temptation to turn stones into bread plays havoc with people's morality. I was amazed at the courage of one writer in 1938 who warned that it was the industrialists who were clamouring for war, and that to provoke Hitler was going to line the pockets of a few. I don't know whether or not the argument was correct, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility.

So we note the dangers of reciting off an isolated verse. The path of evil can even be made to look desirable by using the bible to suit our own purposes.

Easy Popularity

What is being offered here is, "*Here is a short cut. You float from up here and you save yourself all the drama of helping people, getting yourself in trouble with the authorities, all that pain on the cross. Here is easy popularity.*" But popularity that is won easily is lost just as easily. How often do you see the brilliant sportsman who is lauded by the spectators one week, being given the "bronze cheer" when she/he plays a bad game the next.

Here is a temptation for the church too. By performing a few spectacular acts we can see a response from people and think that this is the role of the church. Many of you would know of congregations excitedly boasting so many new converts each year and yet the overall size of the church never really grows. That would be a short term easy popularity which sadly means that people go out the back door as quickly as they come in the front.

The real work of the church is not in the spectacular. Some of you may have worshipped in churches where you have been overawed by the organisation; impressed by the buildings; the smooth flow of the worship and the slick preaching. But unless there is accompanying all this the quiet love and caring of individual members, it counts for little!

What if Jesus said "Yes"?

If Jesus had succumbed to the nagging doubts of the tempter, history might have been recorded something like this:

1. There was a prophet called Jesus who had an amazing ability to turn stones into bread. Thousands of followers followed him, anxious to get their hands on the easy food. However his followers soon dissipated for they quickly grew tired of the monotonous diet.

False Power

Men (and even a few women) have tried to win the world by force - to gain false power by armies, tanks, napalm, nuclear or chemical weapons. We have seen all this bring untold cruelty, misery and murder to our planet. Some almost achieved their goals and enjoyed fame and prestige for a while, but who are they? **Alexander** dies a young man in his thirties. **Napoleon** dies in exile on St. Helena. **Hitler** dies by his own hand, and Japan's principal wartime leader, **Tojo**, died at the end of a rope.

Jesus chose another way. His kingdom was not of this world. He didn't want false power. His battle was not with people, but with evil. He loved, he healed, he patiently taught. His death was not a sign of a miserable decline, but a sign of solidarity, power and ultimate triumph.

Evil continues to lure us in the same way. You desire achievement? You have a choice as to how you go about it. You can play the game of life whereby you twist the rules. To achieve at work you become more ruthless and less interested in family. To achieve acceptance you lower your standards and succumb to the pressures of others. To fulfill a fancy for a fling, you compromise your views about the higher meaning of intimacy and sex.

Worship the Devil and all power can be yours?

“No! Emphatically no,” replies Jesus. *“You shall worship only God.”*

What about a Trick or Two? (v6)

Note this is not an early account of hang-gliding! A three hundred foot drop into the Kedron Valley! That's not a temptation to me! But what exactly is going on here? We note the evil one's ability to use scripture.

(Ps 91:11ff) The whole battle is a fascinating one. Scripture is tossed around and as the story unfolds, the evil one seems to have an uncanny knack of being able to use it out of context and to twist it to suit his own purposes.

“Humankind cannot live by bread alone”

Jesus knows that the path to Messiahship is not by turning stones into bread to feed people. Such a following would be fickle, and as soon as more attractive sustenance became available the followers would change leaders. Jesus knows that people cannot live by bread alone; that even though material needs are being supplied, people are still restless beings.

Good conditions and decent pay are no longer enough for the worker but job satisfaction is demanded as well. It is not enough to provide good food and hygienic conditions for the baby, but love and human connection are needed too. No longer is it enough to provide just an allowance and satisfactory appliances for the person working at home, but affirmation and recognition are important too. People do not live by bread alone.

The temptation is just the same for the church. We could cook up a program that overcomes loneliness, provides recreation and combats poverty and racism, but that would be to succumb to the first temptation of turning stones into bread. The church must always see us as spiritual beings; inadequate unless we have a vital link with our Creator and Lord. We are not *“whole”* unless such a link is in place. To preach a gospel that only meets people's physical needs is taking an unbiblical *“short cut”*.

“Worship me - and you can have the lot”

There are many who have been trapped with this temptation of power. Principles and ethics go by the wayside. Materialism and the greed for power with all its cut-throat short cuts ruins friendships and undermines faith in humanity. Jesus was offered the whole material world as a short cut to Israel's political messiahship but the temptation was an offer of “false power”.

We see it repeatedly in the world of politics, where using the shoulders of the person before them, there is a mad scramble to climb to the top, and friendships and principles mostly count for little in the end.