

## **THE DISTANCE**

A *VERY REASONABLE PERSON* – Readers Theatre adapted from Stages on the Way

In the preface to a 1961 edition of *The Screwtape Letters*, the author, C. S. Lewis, responds to some frequently asked questions regarding this work of speculation about diabolical life. He insists that years of theological study is not what prepared him to write about how temptation works. It demanded only a close inspection of his own heart. He says that the most common question is whether he really believes in “the Devil.” It is a reasonable query given the subject matter of the book and his response is a good one I think:

*...if by “the Devil” you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly No. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a “perfect badness” opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will, memory, energy, and existence itself) there would be none of him left.*

*The proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God and, as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils.*

*...I believe this not in the sense that it is part of my creed, but in the sense that it is one of my opinions. My religion would not be in ruins if this opinion were shown to be false.*

He goes on to clarify that his belief in angels – good or bad – does not mean he believes in the way they are often represented in art and literature.

I find Lewis’s comments helpful from a number of perspectives – mostly because I applaud his admission that what he believes about devils or “the Devil” is a matter of opinion – his opinion. Each of us has our own opinion about evil in the world and how it is manifest. We bring these opinions with us as we read scripture – opinions that help or hinder us as we try to draw meaning from the gospel text that is presented to us this morning.

The authors of our dramatic take on Jesus’ experience of temptation offered following the scripture reading today present “the Devil” as an ordinary person – compassionate, knowledgeable, reasonable – one who looks normal and helpful just like any one of us. They are reminding us not to be fooled into thinking that evil will always look evil – that what appears good may indeed need to be questioned.

On the face of it, the devil in the desert is telling Jesus the truth. Behind all of the proposals – all the urging that Jesus take matters into his own hands and do good – all that is suggested to Jesus is beneficial for humanity – bread, religious signs, and political power. What is offered is not self-evidently bad – the tests therefore are not simple.

The devil tells Jesus that as God's Son, he can find bread in the desert. That was true in the past: God miraculously provided bread in the desert for the children of Israel after their exodus from Egypt. It's going to be true in the future: in stories to come, Jesus will – through God's power – provide a miraculous abundance of food for five thousand and seven thousand hungry people.

The devil says that God will care for those whom God loves – particularly for Jesus. That's true. God's care for each one of God's children is trustworthy. The devil also says that the kingdoms of the earth would bow before Jesus. That's true. Jesus does indeed bear the name before which "*every knee should bend, and every tongue confess*" his lordship. Every point that the devil makes is – in a sense – biblical and true.

Though the devil's words are true, they're not the whole truth. Though the devil's words are from scripture – God's word – they are not God's word to Jesus at that moment in his vocation. While all of the devil's points are – in a sense – true, or are at least based on partial truth, they are not helpful.

But is bread not necessary for life? Shouldn't we utilize political power for the order and benefit of humanity? What is the harm in a sign – a clear sign of the reality and power of God? Especially since "the devil" in the story backs it all up with citations from scripture!

Yet Jesus rejects all of the suggestions – quoting scripture right back at his tempter. He refuses public, obvious demonstration of his relationship to God in favour of obedience to God. Clearly Jesus does not believe that every word of scripture is equally applicable to his situation. Jesus will not accept just any word from scripture as God's word to him at that moment. For Jesus, it's not just about God's truth – it's also about God's time, God's call, and God's love. There is discernment in his approach to scripture – a recognition of context and circumstance that can guide us in our own reading of, and interaction with, the biblical text.

Matthew's story of Jesus' temptation is not intended to confirm or deny the existence of "the devil". The story isn't really about "the devil" at all but the nature of Jesus. As we see what Jesus rejects we are given insight into ourselves and our various temptations. Any of us would have readily accepted the tempting offers presented – after all, bread, miraculous signs and political power are all good things – right?

Jesus rejects what we would expect him to embrace – what we would likely embrace. And so, as we begin this Lenten season, we recognize that there is some distance between us and Jesus – some distance between what Jesus rejects and what we reject – some distance between what Jesus believes and what we believe.

As we travel this Lenten road over 40 days – as we journey toward Jerusalem together – I pray that the distance between us and Jesus is shortened by God's grace and our willingness to receive it. **Amen**