

LUKE 4:1-13
NO SHORT CUTS!

Superman – he has extraordinary powers to save the planet. He flies around the world saving people from disasters or winning the battle against evil. Maybe another superhero is your favourite? Spiderman, Wonder woman, Capt America, Iron Man. They all do the same kind of thing! Of course, they are comic book figures from Marvel comics and we love the stories of Superman saving the planet, then living as Clark Kent for the rest of the time, hidden in amongst the ordinary people of Metropolis; the others all have their other personas too. Superheros with super-powers are all created to save the planet from evil. But, of course, Superman has his weak spot – kryptonite! Expose him to Kryptonite and he will become weak and you can overpower him; Lex Luther tried that regularly in the movies; but it was always only temporary and his power returned and Superman won again! For you, is Jesus some kind of spiritual version of the cartoon character? Is it Jesus with super-powers to save the planet, or save people in danger? Is that how we see Jesus? Is He this spiritual version of Superman, who can use His power to change the world instantly for people by healing them or helping them?

Did you ever have a hero? This is a person you'd like to be or become? When I was a boy there were a few footballers that I'd like to have been, or perhaps emulated; they were my heros. But as I grew up, I realised two things: first of all, that I wasn't good enough to emulate my footballing heroes; and secondly, that heroes are real people and they have their faults and failings too. Is Jesus our hero, or better than that, our role model? How do we become more like Jesus? This is a challenge and an ambition for the Christian, to become more and more like Jesus, to copy Him, to imitate Him, to emulate Him in the kind of people we are. As soon as we start to try to do that, the first thing we understand is how hard it is to be like Jesus. It feels like three steps forward, and two steps back. How does Jesus become the person God wants Him to be and complete the mission God sent Him to complete? Is He Superman with great powers? How do we become more and more like Jesus? The answer to both questions - "there are no short cuts!"

We were supposed to be reading Mark's gospel today, but Mark's account of Jesus in the desert is so short that I thought it would help us to read a longer version. Every version of this story begins in same way: "*Jesus was...*" (Luke 4:1) The desert was seen as a dangerous place: it was a place where wild animals lived, a place where wild people lived and it was dangerous to be there, apart from fact it was a barren, lifeless place where there was no food! God led Jesus into desert; Jesus was there because God led Him to be there. Does that surprise you? Why would God do that? Why would God put Jesus in the way of danger and difficulty? Two things were happening at the same time: first of all, God leads Jesus into desert to test Him, to see what is in His heart; will He be strong and loyal? Then, on the back of that and for a very different reason, the devil comes along to try to lead Jesus astray; he has a different outcome in mind, to derail Jesus' ministry before it even got started. In the end, we see what is in Jesus' heart! It is the beginning of a long road for Jesus, but we see Jesus' heart, His humility, His loyalty, His willingness to serve.

All three of the devil's questions are about power – how will Jesus use His power, or abuse His power? First, "*If you...*" (Luke 4:3) He is sowing the seed of doubt in Jesus' mind about God's affirmation of His Son, but this is more about using His power to do magic and to satisfy Himself; "you're hungry; you need fed; you have power to make your tea from the rocks; go on!" The second is about a different kind of power, about world domination: "*I will...*" (Luke 4:6f) The cost of world domination is selling His soul but you can have this power over all the nations of the world; how many people have been sold on that dream?! Does that appeal? Thirdly, Jesus is tempted to rely on the power of God to save Him: "*If you...*" (Luke 4:9) "God will look after you; you won't hurt yourself!" If Jesus had listened to the devil, His life would

have gone a very different road; all that God had set would have been over before it had begun.

“Although...” (Heb 5:8) Jesus learned to obey? How does that work? What's in Jesus' mind as He goes out into desert? Before He has done any ministry, what is in His mind? Israel spent forty years in the desert, wandering, God seeing what was in their hearts as a people; Jesus spent forty days in the desert, fasting, praying, considering what His life and ministry would be like. What's in His mind? “How can I be the person God wants? How can I be the right kind of person? What is the right thing for me to be? What is the right thing for me to do? The Father has called me; what does that mean? What will that involve?” There was lots of time to think. Then the devil comes along with an alternative plan; Jesus has choices to make, hard choices, not automatic choices! Jesus learned to obey; Jesus learned to be the right kind of person by being faced with these hard choices, by being in the desert for forty days. There would be other times and other places that would be hard and He would suffer, especially at the cross; in these hard times and hard choices, Jesus learned to obey! Do you see what was in His heart? There are no short cuts!

The outcome of all of this is that Jesus is the Saviour. He is the Saviour of the world; He completes the work God gave Him to do; the Son of God becomes the Saviour of the world forever, He becomes our Saviour. But there were no short cuts! It started in the desert, a bad place, a dangerous place, a place where He was tempted; it ended on the cross, a place of suffering and shame, a humiliating place, a deeply painful place. Jesus obeyed and learned obedience in these hard places, with hard choices to make. What was in His heart? What words would you use to describe what you see in Jesus's heart? We see someone full of love and compassion for us, who knows what life is really like, who knows how hard it can be, and how hard the choices are that we have to make, and how many times we are tested and tried. He walks the same road as us! He understands our situations and circumstances and listens to our prayers and helps us.

“Summertime, and the livin' is easy/ Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high/ Oh, your daddy's rich and your ma is good-lookin'/ So hush, little baby, don't you cry” (Summertime; Porgy and Bess; Gershwin) Is that how you want life to be? You want life to be easy, smooth, with nothing to bother you, to be rich and good-looking? We'd love that, would we not. Of course, life can be like that at times and we enjoy life when it is like that – when the days are sweet, and life is exciting and full of good things and we enjoy these times. But there are times when life is very different, when it is hard, when there are difficult choices to make and we're not sure which way to go; there are times when we or people we know suffer and we wonder why God allows these things to happen. Our hard times are not “sent by God”; they are part of life for us as human beings; they always have been and I suppose they always will be; they were part of Jesus' life. In times like these God sees what is in our hearts; it is in times like these that we see what is in our hearts. It is times like these that faith learns new things: that faith learns a resilience and a strength it never had before; when faith learns to walk with God because God walks with us; when faith learns to pray with a depth we never prayed with before; when faith learns to depend on God and on other people in a way we never needed to do before. We wish life was easy and smooth; we wish that being disciples would be easy and smooth; but life and faith are not always like that – there are no short cuts!

Jesus' challenge was to complete God's mission and be the Saviour of the world; there were no short cuts! Our challenge is to be like Jesus; again there are no short cuts! But here's the thing: 2000 years later, the work that Jesus did still stands; He is still the Saviour of the world; He still saves us; He still answers our prayer. Here's the thing for us – being like Jesus is the best thing we can do; being like Jesus adds value, adds quality, adds grace to our lives and nothing can beat that and nothing can take that away! Superman He is not; the Saviour of the world He is and always will be; *“Although...” (Heb 5:8)*