

Lent 1, Year C.

21st February, 2010

Spiritual Battlegrounds
Luke 4:1-15

Journey into Lent

Ashes are a powerful symbol. We begin our journey into Lent with ashes: a reminder of our mortality and humanity, of our dependency on God for real life, for new life. And a reminder that this whole process of new life springs from the ashes, and involves searing fire that burns into ash our offerings of the baggage we carry that makes our journey in life and faith difficult.

Lent, with its backdrop of a desert-like stripping back to essentials, serves to call us into more focused reflection. If we allow it to. And in that back-the-front, paradoxical way that we are constantly confronted with in Jesus, the way forward in the journey is through slowing down, even standing still— simply being and waiting, allowing the reflective and penitential and austere character of the season to sharpen our awareness and senses.

In the quietness and reflection, those things that stand in the way of deep transformation are able to rise and make themselves known. What can be difficult in Lent, or anytime when we intentionally seek a deeper walk with God, is that all sorts of things rise up as obstacles and temptations to divert us. They are there all the time, of course; but seem to move from being distractions to being obstacles and blocks in seeking a deeper communion with God.

Jesus in the Wilderness

As is always the case, this first Sunday of Lent takes us into the desert wilderness with Jesus, facing testing and temptation.

After Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan, “full of the Holy Spirit, he returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert... in order to be tested by the devil”. The more graphic wording for this story in Mark’s Gospel has Jesus being driven – thrust out - by the Spirit into the wilderness. This was no Sunday School picnic excursion to the local park. Nor is it mere coincidence that this wilderness experience of testing, this experience of the forces of opposition and resistance, follows Jesus’ baptism. Jesus’ baptism affirmed him as God’s beloved Son, and affirmed also his dependence on God for his Father’s empowerment and blessing. His baptism marked him as ready to begin his work and mission.

“The Devil”

The voice that spoke to Jesus in the wilderness offered Jesus the easy way of being God’s Son and doing God’s work. Named as the devil, this voice holds out to Jesus a common lure “reject your baptism. You didn’t need it anyway: You’re God’s Son; you’re divine; forget about this being human and humbling yourself. You can do

anything; you can have anything – fame, fortune and power. You don't have to go down a difficult path. Live the easy way”.

Now, we mightn't want to think in terms of a personified “devil” or “Satan”, like they automatically did in ancient times. But just as we believe in a God who is goodness and light, we can also experience a contrary force that would lure us into darkness and evil, and resist our desires to move towards Christ and his transforming love. We can experience this as distractions, or obstacles or those old internal voices that highlight the baggage we carry from our pasts.

Expect the temptations

In fact, Christian mystics, like St John of the Cross, suggest that in getting serious about our faith and in seeking a deeper spiritual life, in seeking to live a truly baptismal and transformed life, we should not be at all surprised to have a struggle; to hear those voices that cause us grief and clamour for attention. The mystics say we should *expect resistance* and the obstacles to this business of going deeper in faith. Expect the temptations. They tell us that it is actually an essential part of the journey, and indeed marks the journey as being authentic.

In the wilderness, the devil held out the easy way to Christ – the quick fix – stones into bread; power and wealth and spectacular fame instead of the way of poverty, dispossession, servant-hood, and humility. We face the same temptations, and the same things that cause us to stumble and resist in our faith journeys - perhaps even more so in our fast and consumerist society. There are lots of other gods to follow, things that can seem really good, and there's so much on offer to give us the easy way –so many other activities to pursue that don't demand that we reach inside to look at ourselves, clean out the baggage and consider the claims of God in our lives. We fill our empty spaces within with all the sorts of lures that the devil offered to Jesus; except that we name these as hopes and dreams and goals and good and sensible living.

Our wilderness battleground for spiritual growth is found in the things and places of everyday life. Even when we make the space to withdraw for reflection and open ourselves to the work of God in our lives, that space is subject to competing lures and demands. Temptations to stop; to be complacent. This is where we're tempted to edge God aside; where we can tell ourselves we don't need to do this. It's easier to pay attention to the latest pop psychology and worldly advice to find answers and affirmations and some sort of peace, than it is to stick it out to listen to God and follow his voice. It's easier to fall back on Sunday School levels of understanding instead of going what can be the harder road, to a mature and tested faith where the answers might come more slowly or not at all. This is the road of the wilderness, where we open our lives to God, risk ourselves and wait on him, and trust him. This is where we discover God's faithfulness in deeper measure. And this is where we can really discover the growth and adventure and transformation we can find in Christ.

So, where does this leave us? All of us are besieged by the same sort of temptations Christ encountered, all the sorts of things that can lure us from that deeper place God calls all of us to.

At the end of Jesus' time in the wilderness, we're told the devil "departed from him until an opportune time". He was waiting to have another go. So don't be surprised by resistance, by temptations. Because where God is drawing us to, is a transformed life that holds more promise and is richer than anything we can acquire and build for ourselves. And this is contrary to the opposing forces of this world. Don't be surprised or alarmed by resistance – have no fear and dread – because the Spirit of God is at work in us. We're not alone in the wilderness battle: remember the Spirit accompanied Jesus into the desert, and Jesus left the desert not simply led by, but "filled with the power of the Spirit". And so the Spirit is and will be with us, too. It's *God's* Spirit who is leading us. And expect the new life to rise from the ashes.

And one last thing: a practical workshop for your week. Find some time and space this week. Structure your space, your environment to minimize the disruptions and temptations. Persevere through the resistances and distractions. Sit quietly with God and pray the prayer for Lent given to you on p.3 of your pewsheet. Allow God to speak to you through this prayer:

God of promises and new beginnings,
 we hear you calling us
 to turn away from our yesterday
 and towards your tomorrow,
 to let go of the things that weigh us down,
 and to embrace the mercy you offer us
 with a generosity we can scarcely comprehend.
 As we set out into this Season of Lent,
 receive us as we are,
 and transform us: change us,
 make us new, set a right heart within us.
 We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen.**