

Sunday 9 March, 2014

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Matthew 4:1-11

In the Wilderness

Today many churches begin the season of Lent. Lent traditionally begins with the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Each of the gospel writers say that Jesus was in this difficult physical and spiritual situation for a long time in a barren desert place, alone. A long time in Biblical terms is often expressed as 40 days. There are parallels in the Old testament - we think of Noah and his family being in the ark as it rained for 40 days and nights; and the 40 years wandering in the wilderness by the people of Israel. So traditionally, Lent is a period of 40 days which ends on Easter Sunday.

Jesus in the wilderness, facing temptation, being tested.

What is this about? What does it have to do with us today?

First, what is going on in this story?

The most obvious thing is that Jesus is working out in his mind what it means to be "The Beloved, the Son of God." He has just been baptised by John in the desert in the river Jordan and is affirmed as the Son of God. We tend to think this was a special title reserved only for Jesus but in fact, it was a title Jesus would have known had been used of many others. In his own religious tradition for example, David was called the Son of God. Roman Emperors were also called the Son of God.

So now Jesus has to work out for himself what does this mean for him to be the Son of God. Imagine the scene. His Baptism is over. Jesus is alone, in the desert. He has probably been wandering, going over and over in his mind, what is God's way? How will I live it? What will I do? All the stories of his people wandering in the desert for 40 years, their trust in God being tested would have come to mind - the way the people time and again, failed. He probably pondered the ancient story of Adam and Eve giving in to the temptation of being like God.

Eventually Jesus decides firstly that dazzling people with displays of power, such as changing stones into bread would win over a few but at the end of the day, would satisfy no one. We don't live by bread alone. In other words, our deepest needs cannot be satisfied by objects. We don't live just live on things and stuff despite our world screaming out to us that all we need is to consume this or that and our hunger will be satisfied, we will be someone.

The temptation Jesus faced was, "If you are really powerful, feed yourself, acquire things, get something, consume."

In the second temptation Jesus is actually tempted to be unfaithful, to test God through his knowledge of scripture. “Throw yourself off the temple tower. God will give instructions to the angels about you. They will catch you as you fall and you won’t so much as stub your toe on the rocks below.”

This is using scripture a bit like an insurance policy. I know I have done this with certain texts. Let’s face it, scripture can be skewed to mean what we want it to mean. And we use it to judge others. We attach a certain value to it that isn’t inspired by God and yet call it God’s Word. So this second temptation is a test of Jesus commitment to God. It is a test of his integrity.

These first two temptations then – turning stones to bread, a party trick with stone and a life-threatening stunt - are tests of Jesus identity. What does it mean to be the Son of God?

The third temptation is the ultimate test. The first two were relatively easy to resist but the third, much harder. The question of allegiance is at the heart of this test. In order to gain power will he, Jesus be prepared to let go of any power he might have had, submit to the one who owns the whole world and accept whatever lies in store for him. Ultimately, the cross is what this exchange is all about. Jesus has further temptations throughout his ministry, not the least of which is the one that causes him to sweat blood –the desire to avoid pain, humiliation and death, and the desire to obey the taunt “if you are the messiah, the Son of God, come down off that cross.”

For all the times he says ‘no’ to the temptations, there is a greater, over-arching ‘yes’ that holds him steady and lifts his head to a bigger vision of God’s great redemption, God’s way. A love of God and a love for the world is a greater love in Jesus than the love of profile or the love of power. “Worship the Lord your God, and only the Lord your God.”

This test in the desert lays the groundwork for any further temptations. Jesus has established the basis of his ministry. His head is clear. His allegiance to God will not allow for cheap tricks, attention-seeking or power plays.

One writer commented on today’s scripture – ‘I think we need to be careful as we read and hear the story that we don’t make Jesus into some kind of super-hero who is strong in the face of evil, who can fire rounds of scripture from the hip and that Jesus is the unbeatable Son of God and completely victorious over evil, that Jesus is able to fast for 40 days and not salivate at the prospect of food. If we do, it is hard to relate in any way

to this kind of Jesus. The implication is that as a Christian I should be unbeatable, untemptable, a walking concordance and worst of all, not get hungry.

Furthermore, I don't find it helpful to know that the Son of God is able to withstand temptation – that's what a son of God should be able to do. A human however, able to withstand temptations put before Jesus the man of Nazareth, tells us something very different. It tells us that God, truly incarnate, struggles with the issues that we struggle with every day. Jesus, fully human, feels the pull of human needs and desires, and yet chooses to walk the way of the cross. Think about this.... If Jesus didn't have the capacity to sin, there would be no test. There has to be a possibility that Jesus could have given in for this to be a real test, a real temptation.

Our readings today tell us essentially what it means to be human. To be human means there is a possibility of knowing both the good and bad of life. To be human is to be hungry. To be human is to be tempted. In other words, to be tempted is to be human.”

So what has this to do with you and I today?

It seems to me that we, in this wonderful country of ours, are in a wilderness. It is a wilderness in which our understanding of what it means to be human and to live the way of God as revealed in Jesus is being tested. The test is in the form of our country's treatment of asylum seekers. There are many who find the government's approach unjustifiable and inhumane. There are others who believe in a different way. Our church is making a clear statement that care for the most vulnerable is a better than detention. Our church for example, The Uniting Church in Australia, has written to the Australian Government to offer sanctuary for all children without parents currently held on Christmas Island. The Church's offer was prompted by information that children without parents being detained on Christmas Island have been scheduled for imminent deportation to offshore facilities on Nauru.

It is clearly tempting for Government to use its power to enforce its inhumane policies and it is equally tempting for people to turn a blind eye to what is happening or to feel helpless and powerless. However, It is encouraging to know that thousands of ordinary Australians have joined the Give Hope campaign to work for a more humane and compassionate response to asylum seekers. And our Moderator, Rev Dr Brian Brown is urging as many as possible to be involved.

Jesus in the wilderness shows us that the way of love and justice is not an easy road to walk. It is fraught with temptation to choose other ways. It inevitably leads to a cross but it is the way of God. The Cross stands as a reminder that when we are in the wilderness, God is with us; that love will prevail and bring new life.

Today, like it was for Jesus in the wilderness, our integrity is on the line; our identity as Australians and as Christians is being questioned; our willingness to walk the way of God is being tested. How will we respond? How will you and I respond?

May our wilderness experience make us strong in our resolve to serve God no matter the cost . May we be faithful in following Jesus through our involvement with the most needy and vulnerable in our world. Amen.