

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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First Sunday of Lent

'The Wilderness Without and Within'

10 March 2019

Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16;
Romans 10: 4-13; Luke 4: 1-15.

Last Wednesday we began the journey through Lent toward Easter. In the three services held that day, ashes in the form of a cross were placed on the forehead of worshippers as a sign of penitence and humility. It is in this way that many millions of people in churches around the world entered this time of reflection and preparation.

Beginnings

Moreover, as part of a Lenten discipline, many of us here at St James are studying the book 'Reconciliation' by theologian Dr Muthuraj Swamy. In his book, Swamy presents the idea of reconciliation as being both part of the nature of God, and as a means of transformation, justice and peace. He takes an inter-disciplinary approach to this topic drawing, not only on theology, but also on his studies in psychology, sociology, politics and philosophy.

At the centre of the concept of reconciliation is the overriding importance of good relationships – that is with God, each other and with oneself. It is argued that this can be discerned in the process of creation (described in the early chapters of Genesis), where God creates the world for the purpose of relating to it.

Humans, in the representative figures of Adam and Eve, were especially created for a relationship with God; and in this respect, humanity received the dignity of free-will. But there is a catch, for with free-will comes the ability to make a choice that ultimately leads to moral understanding.

Genesis chapter three illustrates this as coming from the eating of the "fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". Through this act comes the self-conscious realisation of guilt and shame, as well as the capacity to choose to do evil instead of good - which is called sin. It is for this reason that the man and the woman could no longer live in the innocence of the garden and were therefore forced in the harsh reality of the 'real world', where they must struggle with nature and each other.

This narrative is linked to the paradox of love; for love requires that there must be freedom to choose otherwise it is not love but coercion and abuse. Love is therefore a risky business; we cannot make people love us, we can only offer love and hope that it will be reciprocated. Jesus talked about this on his journey to the cross, of which his parable of the prodigal son and the loving father is a prime example.

Wanderings

Moving on from these pre-history stories of the creation of nature, society and the human condition, the writings of the Old Testament go on to pursue a description of the relationship between humanity and God down through history. It includes many stories of brokenness and sin, followed by the necessary reconciliation and restoration in response.

Early in the piece, the story takes a particularly dramatic turn with the Hebrews ending up as slaves in Egypt. The story of the Exodus becomes a defining moment for God's people as they flee their oppressors, followed by forty years in the wilderness, before entering the promised land. It is this moment of entering the land that is described in today's reading from Deuteronomy. In it the people give thanks for the land that they are to receive – 'a land flowing with milk and honey'.

The Exodus has become a metaphor for the spiritual journey of moving from slavery to sin and brokenness to freedom and salvation. Between the states of subjugation and liberty is the state of 'wandering', which is where we often find ourselves in our spiritual journeys. We can be conscious of having moved on from oppression with the hope of something better in the future; yet are still aware that we live in a broken world.

The ministry of the church is carried out in the midst of these spiritual wanderings, which Muthuraj Swamy picks this up in his book on reconciliation. He describes how we live in a world of division and conflict that fears diversity and 'otherness'. Instead, we tend to adhere to power structures that exclude and dominate the weak. Sadly, in many places the institutional churches and their leaders has become both a cause and icon of such conflict and exclusion as they try to maintain power, status and control.

In contrast, the ministry of reconciliation is meant to overcome this destructive behaviour and draw humanity back into a state of 'atonement', which is the capacity to live without tension – in other words, to live in peace. This is our mission as the people of God – that is, to bring peace even in the face of bullying and violence; as Jesus did on the cross.

The Two Great Commandments (about loving God and one's neighbour), recited as part of the Confession at the beginning of this service, summarise Jesus' approach to addressing the problem of sin. The implication is that we need to choose to love God and our neighbours, as we love ourselves; but what is this love?

St Paul describes it as love without strings attached, a gracious love that expects nothing in return; a love that goes on loving even if the object of our love does not reciprocate; moreover, a love that is actively concerned for the other's well-being and growth.

The Last Temptation

We now come to the temptations of Jesus. The scene is just after Jesus' baptism when he was filled with the Holy Spirit. It is at this point he went into the wilderness where he underwent a series of temptations. Through prayer, reflection and fasting, the wilderness experience was a time of preparation for ministry.

It is interesting to note that we are often tempted at times of spiritual awareness. It also observed that temptations often seem to be good and reasonable things to do. What is often wrong with temptation is the motivation for doing something rather than the act itself. Hence T S Eliot had Thomas a'Beckett say in the play 'Murder in the Cathedral': *"The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason"* – which in the case of Thomas, was a desire for martyrdom so that he might rule the king from the grave.

But let's reflect for a moment on Jesus journey in the wilderness. It is described as a lonely struggle. After all, there is solitude in the desert and therefore nowhere to hide - for the only thing one can hide from is yourself. And that's where our temptations come from - reasonable things like turning stones into bread when we are hungry.

We therefore reflect on Jesus' temptations.

1. Jesus refused to turn stones into bread, saying; *"One does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God"*, thereby rejecting a kingdom based solely on material things.
2. Jesus refused the kingdoms of the world and to worship Satan, saying; *"You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone"* rejecting the false Gods of power and glory.
3. Jesus refused to throw himself off the Temple, saying; *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"* thereby rejecting the false gods of fame and popularity. He refused the easy option and remained faithful to his calling.

After forty days (a parallel with the Exodus story of forty years in the wilderness), Jesus emerged from his desert wanderings (both physical and spiritual) purified, strengthened and ready to commence his ministry of preaching the kingdom of God.

We too are a part of this wilderness journey, a journey to the kingdom of God - a journey from darkness to light – in which we are challenged to look at our own lives. We therefore need a place of solitude (a wilderness, quiet place, or retreat) where we

can look at ourselves and seek God's guidance through reflection, prayer, fasting and study.

Lent gives us a reason to seek this solitude. It also helps us to realise that we need to face up to important decisions about our lives. We therefore reflect on our relationship with God and others. Are we living in the freedom of Christ or under the bondage of sin and brokenness? Are we living for ourselves in a self-righteous huddle or does Christ live through us for others?

The wilderness experience is about facing up to reality with courage and hope. If we have been living shallow and indifferent lives, then let us turn to God. During this journey through Lent we are in a process of transformation that finds its fulfilment at Easter. It is a process of dying to self and living to God, and of bringing reconciliation through humility and love; as Jesus did by his cross and resurrection.