

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 26th February – Lent 1

(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer)

Readings: **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

Psalm 32

Roman 5:12-21

Matthew 4:1-11

When I was at primary school my Dad became very sick and had to have an operation. My brother and I were fascinated with the buttons on the bed and kept pushing them to see what they did. After a while, my normally patient Dad roared at us to stop because he was in such pain. When we left him in hospital that night the possibility of him dying seemed overwhelming and I went out to the garden, pushed my forehead against the back fence, and cried my eyes out. In a very child-like way I also tried to bargain with God in a prayer that went something like, 'If you make him well again – I'll do anything you want!' I wonder if you've ever tried to bargain with God like this?

Looking back, it's embarrassing! It's almost as though I was saying – 'If you make Dad well, I'll be good!' Well, in God's grace, Dad got well – but I'm not sure how grateful I was at the time, or how much my behaviour improved! Looking back I recognise that as a child it was often easiest to remember and reach out to God when life was not going well, and hardest when everything was fine. Even as adults I think we can fall into this way of thinking.

On this first Sunday in Lent we hear from Matthew's Gospel about Jesus being led by the Spirit to go into the wilderness for a time of fasting and prayer. Jesus had just been baptised by John the Baptist and through Baptism had experienced a profound sense of God's affirmation in the words, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It's almost as though the Baptism was a commissioning from God to do something new and significant.

Jesus didn't rush into this but went into the wilderness for a long period of time. The 'forty days and forty nights' phrase was a well understood way of saying poetically.... 'a long time.' Remember in the Noah's Ark story it rained for 'forty days and forty nights'; and Moses similarly went up the mountain for 'forty days and forty nights'. Jewish readers would interpret and hear this phrase not as forty literal days and nights but rather: it rained for a long time, and Moses went up the mountain for a long time.

So, Jesus went into the wilderness for a long time of fasting and prayer. Towards the end of that time he was tempted three times, and in each temptation we might recognise three powerful human motivations. The motivation to have our physical needs met, the motivation to feel in control of things, and the motivation to be recognised as important by others. As we unpack these we will find that Jesus drew from wisdom in the book of Deuteronomy to reject each temptation.

In response to the temptation to turn stones into bread Jesus drew from Deuteronomy chapter eight, verse three, and said, 'A person does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' There is a suggestion here that we are called to be more than animal creatures who simply pursue the physical need for food, water, and reproduction. We are conscious beings who have the capacity to recognise and relate with the intangible reality of God and Spirit. The Lord's Prayer acknowledges our right to ask for what we physically need each day, but not for an excess. We are asked to pray 'Give us this day our daily bread...' not, 'Give us a feast each day!' because too much of anything can be destructive.

The second temptation invited Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem to test God somehow. There's a sense of this saying, 'If you're there God – prove it to me – by answering my prayer the way I want it to be answered!' I'm reminded of the boy crying at the back fence trying to bargain with God, and even trying to manipulate God in some way. Jesus responded by drawing from Deuteronomy chapter six, verse sixteen, with the words, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'. God is God... infinitely wise, infinitely loving... and ultimately mystery! And... we need to come to terms with this.

In the third temptation Jesus was invited to worship someone other than God, with the assurance that all the kingdoms of the world would then be his. Jesus rebuked the tempter by again drawing from Deuteronomy affirming that we are to worship and serve only God. There are so many variations of this temptation in which we make something other than our relationship with God the main game. We might value money more highly than our relationship with God, so we prioritise money and put our energy and effort into pursuing this at the expense of relationships with others, and at the expense of relationship with God. We might put achieving in our career ahead of anything else, our sports team winning ahead of anything else, the appearance of our house ahead of anything else...

There are plenty of attractive things out there to pursue, and when we make them the main focus of our lives we can find ourselves feeling lost and in trouble.

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him...' is great wisdom for us to reflect upon, on this first Sunday in Lent. It provokes uncomfortable questions for us to take into reflection and prayer. If others looked at your life, and looked at mine, what would they conclude about us? Would they conclude that what motivates and energises us each day comes from our faith? Similarly, would they conclude that the way we treat other people, and the things we work to achieve, are similarly grounded?

I know I've got work to do, and I'm thankful for the annual audit that Lent invites me to and hope you feel the same way. That is not to say that there won't be uncomfortable things to

recognise, behaviours to change, and people to reconnect with. But we can each take heart that God's Spirit is with us every step of the way – in the wilderness, and in times of plenty.

May God bless and guide each of us as we intentionally prioritise time for prayer, bible reading and reflection as this Lenten journey unfolds.

Please join me in prayer...

Holy God we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. We offer you our ambitions and desires, and ask for the grace to pray more readily, 'not my will but yours.' We ask this Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Possible questions:

1. Which motivation do you struggle with the most:
 - the motivation to have your physical needs met;
 - the motivation to feel in control of things;
 - or, the motivation to be recognised as important by others?
2. What do you do with what you've identified in response to question 1?
3. Where do you most often have a sense of God?