



Second Sunday in Lent

20th March 2011

Deuteronomy 6: 20-25, Psalm 77: 11-20, Hebrews 3: 12 - 4: 2, Luke 5: 1-11

In the name of God, Father, son and Holy Spirit, Amen

What we see can be enlightening – can everyone read the service sheets all right? It leads you to think you're in the light, but look at the light from the window where no one is sitting. No one is sitting in the light. The light moves, but we don't, we stay where we are. I just thought it was a delightful image, and it's fine, it's an image of the movement that is being asked of us. It's an opportunity for us to see that Lent is asking us to move. The Old Testament reading begins with a good question: 'When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of God's Word in your life, what will you answer?"' And then the reading, without pause, continues and provides a proscriptive answer for us.

It is an unusual question for us now, because on the surface it is so NOT a Lent question; it belongs to the Jewish/Hebrew tradition and it holds such a significance for them that it is also ritualized within the Jewish Passover liturgy. Orthodox Jews would read this and other similar texts, in a literal sense, which serves to underline their belief in themselves as God's chosen; a select group, chosen by God and given a specific piece of real estate called the Promised Land – '*the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors*'.

If we don't go beyond the surface context, then this question very quickly loses any relevance for us. When questions lose relevance, we write them off and so we write off God's Word, or at best, we write off the value of the Deuteronomist's sacred writing; it just becomes irrelevant. One of the polite ways to write off such texts is to apply the evangelical discount, which proclaims Jesus as the Mr. Fixit and tells of a new order of Testament that supersedes the Old Testament misunderstandings. So we can justifiably write off whole sections of sacred texts. Sadly, or gladly, this approach is undermined for us in the second reading, in which Paul (proto-Christian) references the very same Deuteronomy narrative to illustrate his teaching in his letter to the Hebrews. So maybe we need to look at the text again, and with new eyes.

Lent is a time for enlightening ourselves; it's a time to reflect and to seek reflection within the context of the Divine Word. If we stay within the parameters of proscribed answers it is unlikely that we will ever experience any such enlightenment. Lent invites us to question and to look again, to look beyond the surface – it is a time in which we prepare ourselves for the movement of Easter. It's worth remembering, Jesus went into the tomb – it was an orthodox burial. He walked from the tomb, making manifest a new way of being, and a new paradigm for life.

So let's get back to the question: 'When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of God's Word in your life?"' And as we begin to formulate our own answers, it is stunningly unlikely that we'll use as a point of reference, "*We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt*". But look under the surface of that line and we might be drawn to explore for ourselves, where do we find ourselves enslaved? Lent is an opportune time for us to look at the limitations placed on us, to look at the limitations we place on ourselves, and also the limitations we place on others. If you are anything like I am, you'll also need to consider those limitations that we embrace and hang on to in order to rationalize our version of "being all right". In order to get the full benefit of Lent, we are asked to leave the everyday context of our lives and to go out into the desert, go out into the wilderness, the place of no possessions. Metaphorically, this can be achieved if we contemplate ourselves sitting alongside those who have nothing. Sit for a while during Lent with the homeless, HIV+ child who is hungry and cold. Discover what enslaves us by considering what will bring freedom and wholeness to such a child.

Allow an echo of "*We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt*" to determine where we are. Egypt represented the well-governed, well-ordered rich society and Pharaoh, the accepted governing/ruling culture. It was a place so comfortable that the slaves who rebelled and left, very soon, after a short time in the desert, wanted to return. And during Lent this will be the temptation most of us will encounter - we too will be magnetically drawn to stay exactly where we are.

As the answer to the initial question unfolds, the Deuteronomist attributes the movement in the narrative to God: '*He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.*' Those who stay with the surface reading of these ancient texts hold a belief that God did something for them; many orthodox Christians hold exactly the same position, albeit revealed by Jesus instead of Moses. For some it is already manifest in that they are chosen or the saved, and "the ever-hopefuls" hold an expectation of a coming Messiah or a second coming of Christ. Remember the child who sits with you in the wilderness, homeless, HIV+, hungry and cold, and hear a voice ask "Why does not this same God bring me out of slavery into the land of promise?" Once again we are invited beyond the surface reading and we are drawn to explore the activity of God.

The Deuteronomist seems to understand an interventionist God who actively participates (and interferes) in the lives of a few. However, he also seems to point to a God of past actions, who has set down a pattern for life that does not change: 'God did that. If you behave this way, all will be all right'. It is a truly orthodox understanding of God.

Paul speaks of holding '*our first confidence firm to the end*' – there's a continuing holding; however, the action of the exodus, '*the promise of entering his rest*', is still open. In Paul there is a shift to our participating in a divine activity that is ongoing.

In the gospel narrative the Divine action is taken way beyond the orthodoxy of the Old Testament Deuteronomist, and the directions for Lent and for Life are made clear; "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets...*" The movement in the gospel is enlightening. The narrative takes us from Jesus speaking in the shallows, to the disciples going out into the deep water to do what they have been asked by the very Word of God. Here there is no waiting in hope for an abundant promise, rather we find the disciples actively engaged in the creation of an abundant harvest. Here there is no promised land, rather an undertaking of divine activity to create an abundance out of the waters of chaos. The

Divine Activity is given into our hands, it is no longer the activity of an other, nor the words of an other standing in the shallows. It is the action and the activity of life for all.

And if we embrace the movement illustrated in the gospel; if we can see ourselves in the naming of the disciples, then the child who sits with you in the wilderness, homeless, HIV+, hungry and cold, no longer asks, “Why does not your God bring me out of slavery into the Land of promise?”, for now the child will see, and be a part and partner in the abundance of our catch.

The gospel quite delightfully finishes today with a conclusion that again illuminates illustrates our Lenten enlightenment: ‘*When they had brought their boats to shore,*’ - that is, at the end of the movement of Lent – ‘*they left everything and followed him*’ - they walked free from the tomb.

‘When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. And yet, your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; your footprints were unseen.’

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris