



First Sunday of Lent

17th February 2013

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

Last Sunday's readings gave us three divine encounters to look at and contemplate, and we had an opportunity to explore our own encounter with God through the eyes of Isaiah, Paul and Simon Peter. This week's three readings, quite appropriately for the start of Lent, give us three orientations to consider, so they serve as a kind of compass as we begin our journey through Lent.

The first reading from Deuteronomy can readily be seen to underline the tradition for Lent being a season of almsgiving. Coming into the land, coming into an inheritance of God, into a land flowing with milk and honey; coming into the place of divine abundance IS accompanied by, and acknowledged by our giving of our first fruits. Here at the beginning of Lent, we have an orientation toward God's Abundance that is reflected in our own activity of giving; an opportunity to discover that it is in giving that we receive.

On this text there is and has been for centuries an opportunity for the preacher to encourage tithing and take us through the Old Testament teachings into the early Church that shared all that they had in the common. Rather than follow that well-worn path we might use the 40 days of Lent to contemplate this orientation, and to consider for ourselves the whole dynamic of giving and receiving. Lent is a time for us to discover the keys to the mystery of Easter. Is the dynamic of giving and receiving one of the keys? If I let go of everything I hold on to, then my hands are empty and free to receive. Will this same dynamic be made manifest in the Dying and Rising of the Easter narrative?

The second reading from Romans offers another orientation that can encourage us toward a Lenten journey that will take us beyond the Church and beyond our cultural norms. We are invited to contemplate the "end of the law" and to think more deeply about "righteousness". That is to go beyond the doctrines, dogmas, rules and expectations of religious practice and see the Divine Word, the very breath of creation "*on your lips and in your heart*". And when we can imagine and make manifest such a reality will we fully realise that there is "*there is no distinction between Jew and Greek*". The Lord is generous to all. Again, for centuries, many have held on to the 'laws of the Church' as the very thing which keeps the ship of the church afloat on the sea of faith.

Be mindful this Lent that both Archbishop Rowan Williams and Pope Benedict XVI have recently jumped ship! Actually more correctly, they have taken leave of the bridge. `So perhaps this Lent, with the vacancy provided, we might contemplate ourselves on the bridge. We don't need an invitation from the Vatican or from Canterbury, Lent itself is the invitation; "*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart*". We are invited to speak and live in that Divine Word, without the restrictions of law.

In the forty days of Lent can we embrace that lawless place, and be open to a new appreciation and a new direction. Can we begin to contemplate a reality where "*there is no*

distinction between Jew and Greek". It will be a disturbing reality, for the Church is built on the foundations of exclusion rather than the embrace of inclusion.

With an orientation toward giving from the first reading and with a new openness and encouraged to be and to speak within the Divine Word from the second reading, we encounter the gospel narrative of the testing of Jesus, who spends his Lent in the wilderness. The first test is related to hunger, the second to power and possessions, and the third to self-protection and preservation. These are well-crafted 'tests' for us to contemplate during Lent, for they offer keys to the unlocking of our inner being; they offer an opportunity for us to more fully know ourselves.

When we consider the subtleties of 'hunger'; we might become aware of the hunger in the world we inhabit, the world of credit cards, fast food and instant gratification. If we can stay in the place of 'hunger', we might find its truest desire, the place where our soul *'pants for thee'*.

Power, position and possessions are the clearly visible desires operative in our culture, the same that was seen by St Francis who sought to give it all away. However, it is not necessarily about giving up everything, rather it is about being free from the fears that drive us into the false security of Power, position and possessions. Our Western culture is fully engaged in this testing dialogue and nearly every TV advertisement reflects the position promoted by Satan in the today's gospel.

An important aside as we consider this second test given to Jesus is to be aware of what Satan was offering;

"5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please."

Satan has the world to give... it is not held in the hands of God the creator! Perhaps we might see in God and Satan, not two opposing beings, but one, with different voices echoing the place they are coming from, and perhaps we too have both voices within ourselves.

The third temptation is a life-threatening test, and as we read, Jesus does not engage it at all. Perhaps this is an indication that his orientation is beyond his own mortality. That would also offer another layer to our understanding of the first two tests. So much of our worldview is shaped by life's scarcity rather than by eternity's abundance.

Jesus will encounter the same time of testing at the end of Lent when he is found in the garden of Gethsemane. The more we stay with this dialogue the more enlightening it becomes. Here at the beginning of Lent we already find ourselves being prepared, or made aware of the enormity of Easter.

The gospel dialogue finishes at verse 12 with;

"Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

And that invites us to question our own testing of God, perhaps there is no God as 'other' to be tested!

What is being played out the gospel narrative is a placing of reference points for us to discern

an orientation for the journey of Lent. Jesus responds to one side of the dialogue with the Word of scripture, finding himself in relation to the two different voices that call to him. His desires - hunger, power, position, possession and even life itself - are placed in relation to the two voices. And neither voice, not Satan, nor God wins the day; rather the path forward is realised and made manifest by Jesus himself, and the same will be evidenced at Easter.

Today's road map for Lent is challenging, *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*
Rather, test yourself!

Peter Humphris