

Third Sunday of Lent

3rd March 2013

Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63: 1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:131-35

Today's readings begin with a passage from Isaiah in which there is an immediacy that calls from wilderness of Lent into the abundant covenant of God's glory. We are encouraged to know ourselves in the Divine light for "the holy one has glorified you", has glorified each and all of us. Is this what we are going to encounter and realise in our journey through Lent?

We began Lent with a reflection on "desire" and that is now voiced in today's psalm as a thirst. "My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you: as a dry and thirsty land where no water is." Are we getting closer to knowing that thirst, to knowing and naming our deepest desire? Our deepest desire and/or our truest thirst are really difficult to discover in the midst of life's distractions, and they are also further disguised by both our cultural conditioning and our religious formation.

The second reading today starts with Paul saying "I do not want you to be unaware"; so let's look for the awareness that is illuminated for us in the readings. First we might bring into awareness the place we are reading from; we are in the wilderness of Lent, and in that place we confront, and are confronted by, truths and doubts that open us to a new worldview, a new awareness and understanding. It is the place where we can discover a new sense of being and so too a new appreciation of who we really are.

Christ's ministry began with his baptism; that's why Mark's gospel needs no birth narrative, it begins with the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan; and that was initiated by "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness". Where we are in Lent, we are listening for just such a cry, that will voice us into a new way of life, a new way of living and of being; a life that is given birth in the reality of resurrection.

Today's readings give us an opportunity to throw off the religious teaching we have been clothed with, to take off all that disguises our deepest desire and the longing thirst of our souls; and to find ourselves in Eden's wilderness, that place in which we can encounter again the one who is near.

In the first reading we are told that we are glorified by the Lord our God. Adored, exalted, venerated, praised; glorified by God, how can we, how will we engage this truth and how will it change our encounter with God? Here there is no 'original sin', even though we are in an Old Testament landscape; and here there is no baptism required to initiate or make real our holiness. It is a given! Here we become aware that the Christ of history is not the redeemer of sin nor the one who heralds the advent of our righteousness - no atonement, no payment for our sins, for we are glorified, and that is a given. We are glorified as we "return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on us[them]... for our God [he] will abundantly pardon." Isaiah identifies the process of repentance as a return that will be encountered with mercy and pardon. And that is why we are encouraged by Isaiah to "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near".

The writings attributed to Paul have given shape to much of the church's tradition and beliefs. However, what is often underplayed is Paul's appreciation of the Christ that extends beyond the historical narrative. What we find in the second reading is a reference to the activity of Moses in the Old Testament, "*all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them*".

Here's the references themselves:

Exodus 17:6: "*I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.*" So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel."

Numbers 20:10-11: "*He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.*"

And here again is Paul's take on this Divine activity: "*all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, **and the rock was Christ.***"

In the wilderness of Lent we might encounter a Christ "who is, and who was and who is to come", rather than an historical figure that brought about a change in the divine/human relationship. Like Paul we might encounter a Christ that illuminates the Divine in the everyday. If we do, then we depart from the Orthodox Christian perspective, which identifies Christ as the superhero figure that saved humanity from destruction and damnation. Christ does not appear in history to change the Divine relationship with humanity, rather he brings to light an awareness, and that awareness makes manifest the living water that quenches our deepest thirst. Remember Paul saying: "I do not want you to be unaware";

Let's go back to where we started and hear again the cry of the Psalm that is echoes our wilderness experience: "*My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you: as a dry and thirsty land where no water is.*" Are we getting closer to knowing that thirst, to knowing and naming our deepest desire? Perhaps we are, for we have discovered examples of such thirst being quenched. Both Old Testament and New Testament examples and both are linked to Christ, who embodies the wholeness of the Divinity that is in Humanity. In the wilderness there is no church and there are no TV commercials and certainly no party political broadcasts; only life, thirsting for its divine realisation.

When we look briefly at the gospel we might glimpse another reality that will confront us in the wilderness. The Pharisees warn Jesus and seek to save his life; the orthodox, educated leaders of religious life advise Jesus to get away and save himself. And Jerusalem, the holiest city in the Jewish tradition and the place of the temple, the house of God, is portrayed as a place of death, a place "that kills the prophets". Jesus chooses to confront the death that awaits him, in fact he confronts the death that seeks him. He no longer thirsts for life, for he lives in the light of his Divine truth.

I want to finish with the words of St Augustine which are ironic really as he is credited with framing the doctrine of original sin; however, in these words he seems to have encountered the Divine in the wilderness of Lent and so might give us some encouragement to do the same.

"Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee; for behold

Thou wert within me, and I outside, and I sought Thee outside, and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou wert with me and I was not with Thee. I was kept from Thee by those things, yet had they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to me to break open my deafness; and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness; Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath, and do now pant for Thee. I tasted Thee and now I hunger and thirst for Thee. Thou didst touch me and I have burned for Thy peace.”

Peter Humphris