

First Sunday in Lent
St Paul's Manuka – 5 March, 2017
Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas

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

Psalms 32

Romans 5: 12-21

Matthew 4: 1-11

Lent as it comes with its sombre colour of purple, its more restrained music and its challenging readings, reminds us that we all at times need to have our time of being lost, of being abandoned, of being in the desert. Without this experience we remain deceived by our pride and the narrowness of our restricted vision. We need to get back to basics and know that we are not the whole measure of things. We need to be made to see that there is more than what we know. We need in worship to come before the God who made us and loves us and to feel that presence in the power of prayer, Scripture, sacrament and fellowship. We need, just like Jesus, to be tested.

Just as the ancient Hebrew people were tested in the desert for forty years so the newly baptised and proclaimed Son of God goes into the desert for testing. This testing was real for Jesus and we should not see this as some sort of charade which the divine Son put on merely to identify with us. Jesus in his humanity was tested by hunger, the need for safety, the desire for power – all the things that were rightly his as the divine Son but which he also had to wrestle with in his humanity.

For Jesus what is at stake in this desert testing is his obedience to God, not by triumphant self-assertion, not by the exercise of power and authority, nor by the power of miracle, but paradoxically by the power of humility, service and suffering. It is here that true greatness is to be found. True greatness is found in following the will of God and by submitting oneself to that will. It is in following and in submission that we attest the place of God in our lives and know the power of God. It is in this knowledge that we live out our Christian lives day by day.

Now this does not mean that we will never encounter difficulty. We will face trials and testing and at times we will feel that these are unbearable. Jesus must surely have felt the same. But at the same time we know that no matter what happens we are never alone and God never stops searching us out, taking us up again and bringing us into a new place of light and refreshment.

It is the temptation of sin which gets in the way of this making of relationship with God. Sin is not simply being naughty or doing bad things – that is childlike thinking. Sin is really distance from God. When we are close to God we know God's will and want to follow it. When we are in touch with God through the Scriptures and when we are fed by the sacraments we have the strength to go on and to remain in relationship with God. When we are self-absorbed and decadent in our life, seeking our own pleasure at the expense of others, we distance ourselves from God and make no room for God. The self-absorption of sin separates us and pushes us away from God whereas the seeking after God connects us with God and in being connected to God we are connected to others. There is no greater place to know that closer presence of God than in worship – here in church or in your own worship at home or where ever. It is here in worship that we are the people of God, coming to God in humility and love and being embraced by the very presence of God as we hear Christ speak to us in the Scriptures, as we gather around the altar as God's people and as we are fed by the body and blood of Christ. There is warm embrace here. There is love here. But there is also challenge and a sending out to live the life God wants us to live in love and service of God and of other people.

It is as we are connected to God through Jesus Christ then we can know the power of God if we are open to it. If we are full of ourselves we leave no room for God. As Paul tells us sin exercised dominion over us but it is through the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, that we are made free and justified, that is, put right before God. It is in our nature to sin, going right back to the mythical story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Our nature is basically good for it is made by God. We are not essentially evil even though we do sin and our nature does allow sin to get the better of us at times. We cannot rescue ourselves, only God through Jesus Christ can do that. This is a message of embracing love, not searing punishment and anger.

Jesus in his desert testing knows the power and the pull of sin but his obedience to God and his reliance on the power of God gives him the strength to get through. We too are like our brother Jesus. We are tested and we need to cling to the power, the grace and the strength of God in order to get through and to return to relationship with God. It is as we come close to God that we move away from sin and into right relationship with God. This coming close to God involves us in the life of faith – the reading of the Scriptures, the faithful trust in the purposes of God, the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord, the willingness to

receive the gifts of the Spirit, the thankfulness in our hearts for all God's gifts to us, the openness to the grace of Christ set forth for us here in the sacrament of the altar and in the daily movement of our lives and very being towards God.

Deep within you and me is a spark, planted by God, known by God and never extinguished. Sin cannot extinguish it, nor can we by our efforts, no matter how debased we become, destroy that spark. That spark is Jesus Christ who bursts into flame in your life and mine as we know and love him and as we trust his work of grace in our lives. In baptism that spark is filled with the very Spirit of God and we are given the Spirit's power to live a life of faith. That is renewed in Confirmation and in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. Lent provides us with the opportunity to know again the presence of Christ, to feel the presence and the power of his grace as it leads us from sin to God. Nowhere is this more poignantly proclaimed than in the events of Easter. Sin can increase but grace will abound. Grace abounds in great measure – more than we can every know or measure. Sin brings death but grace brings new life and right relationship with God. We are justified or put right with God, despite our desert times of sinfulness, and we are led to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ, king of endless glory.