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St Martin's, Bergvliet – Sermon Précis
21 February 2010

Deut 26:1-11; Lk 4:1-13

Lent recalls Jesus' 40 days of temptation, immediately after his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven saying 'You are my Son, the Beloved.' In the wilderness Jesus wrestles with what it means to be the Beloved Son of God the Father, filled with the Spirit.

We too must ask what it means for us to be united in baptism with Jesus in his death and resurrection, to know that God calls us his Beloved Child, to grasp the promise that the Holy Spirit has been given, God's gift, to dwell within us. Lent is a time to return to the fundamental question, 'Who am I?' We must also ask 'Who are we?' as Christians together, whether within this parish; as members of this Diocese, Province and Anglican Communion; or within the body of Christ united with Christians of all denominations, across past, present and future.

The question of what it meant to live as the Messiah assailed Jesus from three different perspectives: the temptations of possessions (turning stones to bread), power (authority over all), and personality-cult (as awesome miracle worker). These are the perennial external marks of success. Even the Old Testament often promises prosperity and success to those who trust in God (e.g. Ps 1). So why is Jesus' identity so threatened by these three temptations, when surely bread can also be used to feed the hungry; power to overcome injustice; and popularity to persuade and bring out the best in people?

Jesus knows the Bible says other things too: 'Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them' (Ps 62:0); or, 'A faithful man will be richly blessed – but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished' (Prov 28:20). Jesus knows that possessions, power and popularity are not what defines us, nor do they provide any solid basis for life.

Lent is a time to pause, and check that we have not lost focus and fallen into these traps. For it is easy enough to lose sight of true value meaning and purpose in contemporary society, and even within our churches. For some preachers say that if we give our lives to Jesus, we will know only the sort of blessing that is measured in money, health, happiness, job promotions, the high regard of others and so on. Or perhaps we see big congregations and lots of money, and reckon that this is proof that these churches are holier than those with smaller numbers, who go through hard times.

Or perhaps we take it to the opposite extreme. Instead of looking at the Bible verses that seem to offer success to the faithful, we dig out the other side of the story: 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do the faithless live at ease?' asks the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer 12:1). And Jesus said this: 'Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you, and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.' From this perspective, poverty, failure and opposition are marks of holiness. So, one way or the other, we can use what we have, or lack, in terms of possessions, power or popularity, as a way of justifying ourselves and putting down others! Or perhaps it hits you the other way round – that you feel guilty whether you are successful or unsuccessful!

In our country of such huge disparities of wealth and vast diversity, questions of identity of self and others can become even more exaggerated. Different ways of being a Christian can also stir up false ideas of competition and worth among us. Is a particular style of worship more holy than another? Is it more important to spend time on projects within the church, or tackling the needs of the wider community, as salt in the world?

If we ask the wrong sort of questions, we are likely to get the wrong sort of answers. This is true, even if we ask these questions of Scripture, as I showed just now over riches or lack of them (though I will add that genuine poverty, which deprives people not only of material wants, but of material needs, like food and housing and clothing and so forth, is always unjust and rooted in evil).

Our first reading, Deut 6:1-11, indicates the importance of reading the whole of Scripture, and letting every verse and passage both inform, and be informed by, the whole of the rest of Scripture. For verses out of context can be used to say all sorts of things. But this passage gives us a wise setting for our understanding of our identity, as individuals, and as the people of God.

When the ancient Hebrew people entered the Promised Land, and reaped their first harvest, they were to bring some of their very first crop as an offering to God, and they were to say some very powerful words. These acknowledge that everything they are, own and achieve, is a gift from God. And so would be everything that followed in the years ahead. God alone supplied their land and freedom, and performs the miracles that make him worthy of praise and worship.

What of us? None of us chose the timing, place or circumstances of our birth – not our parents, skin colour, language, looks, IQ, personalities, abilities, or likes and dislikes. God chose them all. There is no intrinsic superiority or inferiority to any of them. Lent is a time to make sure that such false attitudes have not crept into our ways of looking at ourselves or at others. It is the time to remind ourselves that we too are entirely dependent upon God and his gifts – which we are to use to live the life to which he calls us.

This Lent, we ask ourselves again: when it comes to what I possess, my abilities and how I use them, my relationships with others – am I living on God's terms, dependent on him? Jesus wrestled with temptation, yet made the commitment to see his own identity in these terms.

Jesus then he returned from the wilderness, and lived out his calling, sustained by God's daily bread, worshipping God alone, and trusting in him. Lent is the time for us to face up to the same temptations in our lives, to renew our commitment to God, and to accept his defining of our identity on his terms; and then going forward from here, to live out our calling – sustained by God's daily bread, worshipping God alone, and trusting in him.