

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Preach and Preside – St Martin's, Bergvliet
21 February 2010

First Sunday in Lent
Deut 26:1-11; Lk 4:1-13 [NIV]

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, whose beloved Son was led by the Spirit into the desert, and was tempted as we are.

Dear people of God of St Martins, dear Allan, may I say thank you again, for your invitation to join you today. Thank you also to ...

Today is the first Sunday of Lent – the season of forty days, plus Sundays, that recalls Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness.

This comes immediately after Jesus' baptism, when, as St Luke tells us, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven saying 'You are my Son, the Beloved.'

St Luke tell us that Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led into the wilderness – where he wrestles to get to grips with what it means to be the Beloved Son of God the Father, filled with the Spirit.

This is a question which we must all face as a consequence of our baptism, our faith.

What does it mean for us to be united 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 for us to return again to the fundamental question, 'Who am I?'

We must also ask ourselves 'who are we?' as Christians together, whether within a single parish; as members of this Diocese or the global Anglican Communion; or as part of the whole body of Christ united with Christians of every denomination, across every century: past, present and future.

But let us begin by considering what all this mean for Jesus.

We cannot guess how Jesus had reached a dawning realisation of his calling as the Messiah, the Christ.

We can only speculate and imagine what must have run through his heart, his mind, his deepest being, prior to that moment at his Baptism when his identity as the Beloved Son of the Heavenly Father, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, was confirmed.

It was perhaps an ending of a time of exploring and searching.

But it was certainly also a new beginning.

For if he was indeed, as he had increasingly come to realise, the Messiah, the Christ – what would this mean for how he would now live?

This is the question that assailed him in the wilderness.

And it assailed him from three different perspectives.

We know the three temptations well:

- to turn stones into bread in order to meet his material wants;
- to be in a position of authority over others;
- or to be a miracle worker held in awe and wonder by everyone.

They are the temptations of possessions, of power, of personality-cult.

These are the fairly standard marks of success in contemporary society. It was little different in Jesus' time, and in the centuries before.

Indeed, the Old Testament, at many points, promises prosperity and success to those who put their trust in God.

The very first of the Psalms says 'Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked ... but whose delight is in the law of the Lord. ... Whatever he does, prospers.'

If God promises prosperity and success to those who delight in him, why is it then that Jesus is so assailed, his identity so threatened, by these three temptations?

Even the disciples – along with much of the popular religion of their time – expected that Jesus would reveal himself as Messiah through a powerful uprising that would throw out the Roman occupiers.

They expected him to be placed on a throne in their stead. Then, the hero-worship of the nation – in both political and religious terms – would most certainly be his, and all the material wealth he could desire.

Why is the prospect of possessions, power, popularity, the source of such deep spiritual wrestling? Why does it strike at the heart of Jesus' being, his identity?

Surely bread can also be used to feed the hungry? Surely power can be used to overcome injustice? Surely popularity can be used to persuade and convince others to follow his good example and bring out the best in people?

Surely these are the marks of what it is to know God's favour?

But Jesus has read his Bible more widely than merely to look to the verses that appear to guarantee success as the automatic reward of the faithful.

The Bible says other things too.

In Psalm 62, verse 10, we read: 'Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.'

Proverbs 28, verse 20, takes it even further: 'A faithful man will be richly blessed – but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.'

Here is the heart of the matter.

What is the bedrock of our life? In what, fundamentally, do we put our trust?

And what is the goal of our life? For what, most of all, are we eager, as we consider what we want from our lives?

Jesus knows that when it comes to the true value and meaning in life, well – possessions, power and popularity are not part of the equation.

They are not what defines us, nor do they provide any solid basis for life.

'Man does not live by bread alone' Jesus quotes from Scripture to the devil – and they both knew that the verse from Deuteronomy 8:3 continues 'but by every word that comes out of the mouth of the Lord.'

More than that, human power and authority is only a shadow of the power and authority that is God's.

And if we take what God has given us and promised us, to bring glory to ourselves – well, if we cannot see that dynamic at work within us when it surfaces, then we are in serious trouble!

But is it easy to have such clarity?

This is the question that we particularly turn to in Lent.

This is when we try to make the effort – the space, the time, in our packed and busy lives – to pause, and check that we have not lost the focus, that we have not fallen into any of these traps.

And let's face it, it is easy enough to lose sight of true value, true meaning, true purpose, in contemporary society.

We even find it within our churches.

Don't we know that there are preachers who 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 – and let's face it, there are those who preach it.

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.'

So, perhaps poverty, failure and opposition are marks of holiness?!

It seems that depending on which verses you choose, you can interpret possessions, power, popularity in two completely different ways!

Either way, we can use our identity, in terms of what we have, or lack, in 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 that you are successful, or guilty that you are NOT successful!

In our country of such huge disparities of wealth and such diversity of cultures, of background, of opportunities, all these questions of identity of self and others can become even more exaggerated.

And they can make us very awkward with one another even within the body of Christ.

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 one of these two morning services truly better in the eyes of God than the other?!

Or 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).

So let me turn to the first reading, the passage from the book of Deuteronomy.

It indicates the importance to us of reading the whole of Scripture – and letting every verse, every 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 here we have a passage that 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 words acknowledge that everything they are, everything they own, everything they achieve, is a gift from God. And so would be everything that followed in the years ahead of them.

In all that they are, in all that they have, in all that they do, they are dependent on God:

- It is God who supplied their land, and provided rich and fertile opportunity;
- it was God who had the power to bring them out of slavery into freedom;
- it was God who performed miraculous signs and wonders, and who is worthy of praise and worship.

What of us?

None of us chose to be born. We did not choose the timing of our birth, the place of our birth, the circumstances of our birth – we did not choose our parents, our skin colour, our language, our looks, our IQ, our personalities, our abilities, our likes and dislikes.

God chose them all – as was best for each one of us. There is no intrinsic moral superiority or inferiority to any of them.

Lent is a time to step back – and 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, for so much of our lives.

Of course, we are to use the gifts he gives us in order to live the life to which he calls us.

I suppose you could sum up Jesus' response to the devil like this: 'Nothing in life is on my terms, but everything is on God's terms.'

This Lent, we ask ourselves again: when it comes to what I possess, when it comes to my abilities and how I use them, when it comes to what I seek in 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 – and 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.

May God grant you a holy and blessed Lent, as you do these things.

Amen