

Sunday 1 March 2009: First Sunday of Lent

Jesus in the Wilderness

Readings: Genesis 9.8-17; Mark 1. 9-15

“Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan...and the angels waited on him”

As I read today's Gospel, and thought about our theme for Lent, fulfilling the promises of God, two pictures sprang to my mind. They are both from my stay in Sri Lanka in January.

The first was of an island stuffed with exotic religious imagery, the Buddha standing, sitting and lying, a rich panoply of Hindu statuary, my favourite Ganesh the elephant God – and tiny female household deities holding up steps like Atlas would the world! There were snakes, crocodiles and dragons to scare the living daylights, stars, moons, the lotus blossom, and of course the catholic saints, particularly Mary, St Joseph and St Thomas staring down on me benignly from Church walls and schools. I couldn't help thinking – and we in protestant Christendom have a Cross, and a man dying on that cross, hmmm, made me think, is it enough?

Fulfilment, the fulfilment of the promises of God, sounds so rich a theme – how does this richness of life link with the cross and with our Lenten practices?

The second image which sprang to mind was the handsome and imposing figure of the Bishop of Colombo, Bishop Duleep de Chickera, and me sitting in his room in the beautiful though well guarded Anglican Cathedral Compound. Sitting there I squirmed a bit, with the war on was I wasting his time, what did I really have to say? On the other hand after a while I relaxed knowing there is nowhere I would rather be than in the presence of this man who realises that to live fully as a Christian leader in this moment in Sri Lanka's history is to face the risk of death by government employed assassins .

Does he ever at any moment spare that oppressive regime the lash of his tongue or the burden of his prophetic judgement – never, despite Sri Lankan journalists, secular prophets, being mown down in the streets and his own life under threat. I sat in the presence of another potential Janani Luwum, another potential Oscar Romero, a Christian leader who has fully realised that to live for Christ, to be defined as belonging to Christ in life, entails being ready to die for Christ, and yet a man full of laughter, wisdom, welcome and compassion. I gave up trying to justify myself by talk and gladly accepted his blessing, hoping and praying that one ounce of the courage and fullness of Duleep might remain with me.

At our death we are defined – an end is reached which tells us and others who we have managed to become in life. Are we rich or poor in terms of fulfilment? Have we lived out the promises of God for us, or not?

And that is not only at our eventual death but also at all the other deaths we suffer in life, the so called little deaths, though often God knows those little deaths may be harder to bear than death itself. They offer us the chance, or more likely force on us the opportunity to redefine who we are.

Jesus is facing a death in life as the Spirit of God drives him out into the desert where he is tempted, severely tempted, to turn away from the fullness of who he is. Mark in his gospel says little about the temptations but as they are described in the other gospels Jesus is asked to redefine himself when a full belly is taken away from him – turn these stones to bread - , Jesus is asked to redefine himself when he suffers acute delusions of grandeur – you can have all these kingdoms – Jesus is asked to redefine himself when the enticing thought of escaping our human flesh comes to his cloudy mind – throw yourself down here, it won't hurt, God will save you!

In the desert Jesus faces the reality of who he is – if he is the Messiah he is an utterly human Messiah, gasping with hunger, fragile in flesh, small in the number of human beings he can influence for good in one lifetime. It is this man who walks away from the desert having dug deeply into prayer, into the meaning of the scriptures, into where he stands in his own religious tradition, who relying on God rediscovers his vocation with the clarity and energy to fulfil it.

This testing , can he trust God with who he is, utterly fragile human flesh yet charged with divine responsibility, is but a small echo of the far more strenuous testing which will come at the end of his ministry in the garden of Gethsemane – can this possibly be what you want me to do and be, you who love me and made me? Jesus' being is defined by his trust in God to shape him.

We are not called to think about death constantly – it would drive us mad. Nevertheless even to dip our toes into the Lent groups as we began to do this week, studying the Gospel of John and taking a glimpse at the life experience of each of us, reveals the smaller deaths we deal with all the time – for one of us a serious illness, for another a loneliness, for one a social isolation caused by being simply Christian, for yet another the death to hard won opinions and always being right if we are to learn to love. We face all sorts of deaths.

The rituals involved in keeping a holy Lent are here to help us redefine who we are as we face these deaths. How can we use Lent to do this? There are two ways perhaps of following Jesus own pattern.

For some it is right to give up something – chocolate, alcohol, television, cigarettes, too much food or noise or spending money, whatever we know is right for us to pursue a “modern fast”. We do this because we realise that we are becoming over defined by some habits of ours – over dependent for our sense of well-being on some external comfort. We are losing the sense of learning to depend more on God and what God simply gives to sustain us. To give up that dependency, or try to, is to test and stretch our sense of dependence on God when the going gets tough in the world of our senses. It is to practice loss and change and to see where they leave us in trusting God!

For others it is right rather to turn to spend more time dwelling on God and God's purpose for us and indeed we may need to do that anyway to withstand the serious giving up of anything. Jesus did not simply “wander around the wilderness being empty.” He prayed and spent time with God. He mined the scriptures to help him with his self-definitions, to resist the temptation to escape who he was. And he went **from** his baptism among John's disciples, and returned **to** his own ministry and the choosing of his own responsible friends to help him. He stood within his own tradition and chosen company of friends as he entered and left aloneness. He had a place to stand.

In this pattern he gives us what we need to find our way into more and more awareness of God's presence with us and God's spirit undergirding us – /prayer, letting go in to God,/the study of the

scriptures, finding out what formed the mind of Christ, /and relying on a place to stand, trusted people to advise, accompany, befriend us as we journey through. You may not have the angels – but you can always choose one of us!

Just a word of warning at the start of this period of redefinition of ourselves. Beware people telling you how you should feel in Lent – you may be joyful or sad, empty or full, that will depend what is happening, really happening, in your life – and beware people telling you what to do – only you know if you need to be a taker upper of a religious practice or a giver upper of an unhelpful dependency or both or neither! Some people have just too much real wilderness going on in their lives to manage a single other practice except staying alive! As Lionel Blue was heard to groan on the radio the other day in an uncharacteristically piteous and frank way for a Radio 4 Thought for the Day, **“It’s been a terrible year!”** This is true for him, as he suffers the problems and humiliations of ageing as for some of you suffering other things. Finding a way to bear that reality with grace may well be your Lent!

What **is** to be taken seriously is that while it is clear that Bishop Duleep de Chickera of Colombo faces the risk of actual death obviously, as Jesus did in the last week of his earthly life, nevertheless we all do always in reality, and ours to redefine ourselves as if we remember that sometimes. – to go with Aslan the lion in CS Lewis’ tales of the children and the wardrobe – “higher up and further in”, to trust God more with the **whole** of us and **more** with the whole of us, to allow ourselves to be taken where God is longing to be one with us and to shower us with love, to undergird us with strength and to empower us with his Spirit, so fulfilling God’s promises to us.

Amen.