

The journey of discipleship

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Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Erica loves chocolate. I must say I also am rather partial to it. So, she has decided: 'no chocolate during Lent'. What can I do? It reminds me of the person who proudly announced that, for Lent, they were giving up the 'holy trinity' — that is, coffee, chocolate and alcohol.

Of course, the observance of Lent is supposed to cut far more deeply than these temporary fasts. While giving up some little indulgence of that kind might be a good discipline for these six weeks, the Lenten observance to which we are invited is really a far more vigorous exercise. Like Jesus in the wilderness, Lent calls us to give up all that would keep us from the destiny and vocation to which God calls us. Like Jesus in the wilderness, Lent calls us to perseverance and faithfulness, to commitment, that is a key quality in discipleship.

The account Mark gives of the 'Temptation' of Jesus is so brief as to be enigmatic.. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no content. His text is sharp and explicit. ***And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*** The text is sharp and explicit, the language stark and strong. Notice particularly the verb: "the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out". The Spirit appears to be like a bouncer — throwing Jesus out into the wilderness. The verb literally means 'to throw', 'to throw out'; it has great force. Jesus did not go sedately into the wilderness. The forcefulness of the verb is striking and signals more than a genteel approach to wilderness; it signals more than a genteel approach to Lent — that it is about more than the giving up of the glass of chardonnay.

You can imagine how it was with Jesus. Imagine it from our own experience and faith. Our faith is that we dwell/abide in God, and the more we travel on the journey of faith, the more we become aware of our abiding in God. Most of us glimpse it some of the time; a few of us live more deeply in that awareness of God some more of the time. It is our life-long journey to grow more deeply into that consciousness of God, of living every moment in God; but maybe the invitation of this Lent to us is to be more intentional about it. Let us be intentional in developing that consciousness of God in our lives — and to use this Lent (our commitment to worship, prayer, study and fasting) to do so.

We can use our experience and faith to imagine how it was for Jesus. All his life he'd had that profound sense of God — that God's hand was on his life. Imagine what it would have been like for him growing up as a boy, as a teenager. Imagine, then, that time much later in his life when the young man, Jesus, strode out to encounter his wild cousin, the Baptist, by the river Jordan. In his heart perhaps he felt uncertain about what was before him, and yet he knew that God is always with him. Imagine the sheer rapture of that baptismal moment, so that Jesus experienced the absolute conviction that God's Spirit had come upon him so unmistakably and has conferred upon him an identity and a vocation, which he has been waiting for all his life. And yet, so mind-blowing is that affirmation of him — ***You are my Son, the Beloved*** — that Jesus immediately descended into a kind of panicked confusion and self-doubt. Leaving a bewildered John by the riverside, he ran off into the desert — thrown out, driven out as if by the Spirit of God — there to begin the long and painful journey towards a wholehearted owning of God's purpose and way for him.

Vision and vulnerability go hand in hand. Once the vision of God is perceived, then there is the state of vulnerability. One reads that in the prophets. The text in Mark makes it clear that this is Jesus' experience too. Jesus is thrown out by the Spirit.

Then the working through of the vision occurred in a place of deprivation. Mark tells us that Jesus spent forty days and nights in such a place — the wilderness, that place of wavering, of doubt and uncertainty, of vulnerability. This is the time of loneliness, when doubts and rival versions assail the mind of Jesus — although we get that insight more from Matthew and Luke. For Mark, the wilderness for Jesus is all about confronting, battling the satanic impulses. There he battled the base and animal-like instincts of the many fears that arose within him: we can imagine he endured fears, such as the fear of exposing himself fully to the purposes of God, the fear of ridicule and misunderstanding, the fear of being hurt or even killed as the prophets had been, fear of failing utterly.

This desert pilgrimage of Jesus is a familiar one for Christians. It is a pilgrimage we are all called to walk, in a profound discipleship of Christ. Lent reminds us of that. And perseverance is a key quality in discipleship.

Therefore, it is important to notice a couple of things about Lent. First, Lent is not simply a period of time which began last Wednesday and ends at Easter, then to be forgotten until next year. No! Like Advent, and Easter, and all the seasons of the Christian year, Lent is always with us. It is a dangerous and difficult moment in the divine becoming that breaks into our ordinary and human becoming. It is a summoning and a command that could arrive into the midst of your life and mine at any time. Lent is the experience of struggle, of doubt, of trial. Lent is the call to count the cost of being a disciple. Lent is the time of decision.

The second point follows on from this. Lent is certainly about more than just putting aside one's bad habits or addictions (chocolate or coffee or whatever) for a time, only to take them up again on Easter. Lent is supposed to cut far more deeply than that. Like Jesus in the wilderness, Lent calls us to give up all that would keep us from the destiny and vocation to which God calls us. We are called to make a permanent fast from the attitudes and behaviour that would maim or destroy our own lives or the lives of others. Like the love of status. Or the power-surge that comes in putting someone else down. Or the greed that refuses to share what we have with our poorest neighbours. Or our addiction to self-protection — or to playing the victim. Lent is about fasting, certainly! But the fasting should press deep, deep down, into the places where our most secret appetites are, there to starve them of their horrible power over all that is good and noble and true in us — so that God may live more fully in their place.

So Lent is a place of vulnerability. Whenever we catch that kind of vision of what it is to which God is inviting us, it is uncomfortable, and we might want not to go there — because it would make us feel vulnerable. We become aware of just how very much we love the easier way. We become aware of what the life of discipleship might mean, and we wonder about our resolve to live it. They are difficult issues to face, but they must be faced if we are to persevere in the journey with Christ. Perseverance is a key quality of discipleship. During Lent, we can focus on Jesus and reflect on the connection between vision and vulnerability and the need for perseverance. It is only as we persevere — strengthen our commitment — that we will continue our faith journey to grow more deeply into awareness of God.

Owning a vision for this parish — the sense of the call of God — to be a committed community of faith can be a real crunch point. It is the point where vision and vulnerability merge. What would it mean to be more committed, to persevere more diligently, in our discipleship — both individually and as a community? The answer each of us might give to such a question might make us feel distinctly vulnerable. The level of existing commitment might seem very comfortable; what we practise at the moment and how we do it gives us a certain security, and that feels very OK. But they are pertinent questions — worth pondering: especially on a day when the AGM is to be held, especially during an interregnum, especially during Lent.

So, I encourage you to use this particular Lent as a means of entering more deeply the vision of being a committed disciple within a committed faith community. We have the means by which we can do this. We have opportunities to worship, especially this sacrament of the Eucharist. Can we be more regular, more frequent even? We have the study sessions for individual participation. We have our own personal times of prayer each day. Can we be diligent in that? And we have the challenge to fast. Can we be brave enough to use the discipline of giving up a few indulgences (like chocolate) to empower ourselves to undertake a fasting that presses deep, deep down into the places where our most secret desires are to be found?

In the Lenten season, we are invited to walk in Christ's steps: to follow him into the difficult places, the vulnerable places, to learn, as he did, the true meaning of baptism. Baptism signifies the beginning of our life-long journey to grow more deeply into the consciousness of God, of living every moment in God. Let the invitation of this Lent to us be an invitation to become more intentional in developing that consciousness of God in our lives. Let it be an invitation to continue that journey of discipleship with Christ with commitment and perseverance.