

Lent 1
17/2/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91

Romans 10:8b - 13

Luke 4:1 - 13

In the end is our beginning

We don't usually celebrate Baptism on the first Sunday of Lent. Baptism belongs at Easter time, as a sign of faith in Christ's gift of new life. We may be back to front but while life as a Christian does begin with the Resurrection, the journey of Christian living is in many ways a bit like Lent. It is a life of discipline, in which we are always reflecting on the challenge of what it means to live for God each day, based on the promise of all that Easter stands for.

At first Lent was used as a time of testing and training for those preparing for Baptism. Lent became important after Christians won approval from the state. Their life of challenge that included persecution became comfortable and there was little to distinguish them from the world around them. Lent became the season that allowed them consider their life, to analyse their priorities and refocus on the things that mattered. Essentially Lent still is a time for reassessing what it means to live in faith and trust of God rather than living purely for ourselves.

Temptation, such as Jesus went through, may not seem to be a normal part of our experience. But there are some moments in life, individually and as a Church, when everything about us is brought into sharp focus and we have to go through the process of making a deep decision. Will we choose a new job, accept promotion, or give up work altogether. Will we choose a course of study, plan to go overseas to live or work. Will we decide to leave a relationship, commence one, or go further with one that we have. Perhaps it involved deciding to close a place of worship, terminate a ministry, or change our way of being church. Such decisions require intense reflection and cause us to sort out our priorities and directions at a deep level. Our previous commitments are put under scrutiny. We know that what we decide will affect others in significant ways, and have the potential to rewrite history. There are other times when it does not seem so clear, and we feel our way forward blindly. How shall we choose? Luckily most of us are not put in the position of having to make such deep decisions very often, but it does happen. One thing I have noticed is that having arrived at a point of clarity, often a new challenge comes around the corner to test our resolve.

Temptation is a test that forces us to examine whose we are and what is our destiny. Temptation comes from a spiritual tension in which two contrary urges are felt simultaneously, forcing us to make a choice. We see this repeatedly in the story of Israel who constantly put God to the test. We see this most clearly in the story of Adam and Eve who were torn between living in the garden with God and the attraction of putting themselves at the centre and becoming like God.

The interesting thing about Jesus' temptation is that he is led to the place of testing by the Spirit of God. His journey in the Wilderness is like a microcosm of Israel's journey. The three counter attractions offered could be said to revolve around one point - **will Jesus accept his destiny as a servant, and allow God to be God?** Remember how the serpent suggested that Adam and Eve would "become like God" if they betrayed their trust. The temptations of Jesus have the same point. Will he live in faith and trust? Will he let God be God, or **will he seek to take the power for his own purposes**. This is the fundamental question, and it is one we all have to grapple with at some point. Can we rely on the goodness of God and continue to live in faith and trust, or will we choose a way of our own making?

Jesus, alone in the Wilderness with the Tempter relies only on Scripture and the power of the Spirit as he confronts the will to power, is tempted to strive for survival and make a name for himself, and hears the promise of having the world at his feet. But faced with all this he continues to persevere in faith and does not allow another influence to fill the space. He demonstrates that his heart is truly set on God. The Tempter departs temporarily and Jesus goes forward into his calling.

The reason we need not be too concerned about whether we are doing things in the right liturgical order today is that the deeper meaning of Baptism is found in Jesus' choice not to do what Adam did. Baptism is a sign of placing our trust in God and choosing to walk in Christ's way. That is the choice that is upheld today in this sacrament: the choice to turn to Christ, and live the Gospel in the world.

The reading from Deuteronomy that pictures a harvest festival has a message which links with the theme today. It was possible for such a festival to take place, because of promise of God, and the perseverance of the people. The end of the story was given long before. The end of the story was home, fruitfulness and life as the people of God. Our story begins with the gift of life and home in the Resurrection, and we are called to travel with this gift, as the people of God, not just in Lent but always. One of the best things for us to remember in this forty day period of wilderness living is that one of us, Jesus of Nazareth was tempted as we are, but remained true to his calling as a son of God. His victory stands as a sign of hope, vision and strength.

As long as we are alive, the question of whether we will continue to serve God stays with us. And as long as we are alive the figure of Jesus stands there as the one who had the courage to refuse all other distractions. Thanks to him there begins a new humanity, one that is not trapped in failures of the past, but has the possibility of staying faithful to the covenant of Grace God has made with us and will bring to fulfilment for us all. In this faith and trust, we joyfully Baptise Jess today.
