

Lent 1
10/3/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

With Christ in the desert - aflame with the Spirit

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

You'll have noticed that I am not wearing seasonal purple. A few years ago, my artistic sister presented me with this stole, as a surprise. It was, because it was not in the tradition – except that it takes its central theme from the desert, the red and brown ochres which make our land so essentially Australian. Like the Australian desert, it is not barren. The tree represented in fabric by the leaves of the Tasmanian Blue Gum, and their shape recurs beyond the flowers in red and brown thread, leaves becoming flames. And more of them come down from the top, an abundance, the glory of our gum trees whose seasons never end. And twelve gum nuts, which are real, and happen to have a small Greek cross in their centre. All of Lent is here.

The passage from **Deuteronomy**, a book quoted in both New Testament readings as well, is about bringing the first fruits of the harvest and presenting them at the Temple as a solemn thanksgiving. You may wonder why a harvest festival is an appropriate reading for the beginning of Lent! But behind the thanksgiving is the desert of the Exodus, the wilderness and its immeasurable forty communal years of deprivation, suffering - and trust. That the children of Israel were delivered from that, to a land flowing with milk and honey, is the ground of Lent and this of thanksgiving, this eucharist.

The ritual part of the reading is a kind of creed, a solemn remembrance of the Hebrews' extraordinary journey with God. It begins, 'A wandering Aramean was my *ancestor*' – so says the modern translation, but the original says 'Father' and means it – for it takes the corporate memory back to that wanderer Abraham. The stories from Abraham to Moses are full of strife and battles and jealousies, of loyalty and faithfulness, of sin and suffering, enough to keep us sleepless for 40 nights. And now they have come to a land of milk and honey – in a land given to them, but which they do not own.

Thus in Deuteronomy they are called to thanksgiving, and the offering of their 'first fruits' – the very best that can come from the harvest, which is not theirs. Perhaps the question is: What is the appropriate ground for thanksgiving? What is the context of praise? The recollection of that wandering Aramean requires that thanks be given for the good and the bad, the sufferings of Egypt and the Lord's deliverance, the years in the desert and the safe arrival, in the land of promise. Memory is not enough: it requires us to do something, to give something of what we are, of who we have become. This is the challenge of the Lenten journey.

We offer our first fruits, symbolically, every Lord's Day. In my other congregation (St Mary's), when the collection plates and the bread and wine are brought together to the Lord's Table, this prayer is offered:

'Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation.
Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
which earth has given and human hands have made.
It will become for us the bread of life'.

For myself, the less said about the role of human hands the better; it suggests that we somehow improve on God; – but there is a point. The work of the farmer, the guardians of river systems, the makers of machinery, the carriers and the storage places, the markets, the merchandisers, and we who carry the hessian bags home – all this human work *is* involved, and who would not say that there is sin and suffering and deprivation built into *that* equation? But, as St Paul remarks, God made it grow.

It is also risky that the symbol of first fruits we bring is money. That is how humankind decided – many millennia ago – to facilitate trade. Craig and I wondered last week how long we would continue to take up collections in church, when many (more fruitfully) choose to do it by a bank draft. Perhaps we *could* give those thanks at the Table, as long as what we say sounds like the old song we used to sing:

We give thee but thine own
whate'er the gift may be;
all that we have is thine alone,
a trust, O Lord, from thee.

And it's worth adding that the thanksgiving by the Israelites is done in conscious acknowledgement of the presence of 'the Levites and the aliens who reside among you', our neighbours, the strangers, the modern wanderers.

Today's **Gospel** story comes in three versions, Matthew, Mark and Luke's. They are different, and we read them in a cycle. This year, 'C', it is Luke's.

Luke reminds us that 'Jesus returned from the Jordan' from his baptism, where the Spirit was seen 'descending on him in bodily form as a dove' (3:22), and a voice was heard declaring him to be God's beloved. Luke keeps that event in mind as he writes of the journey to the desert. He does not say, as Mark does (1:12), 'The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness', or even as Matthew does, more mildly, 'Jesus was led up by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil' (4: 1). No. Luke says, '*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness*'. There is a Puritan saying that 'Christ is the oil in which the Spirit lies.' So that it is Jesus aflame 'in the Spirit' who survives the wilderness, and who faces the demon. Hence the leaves which turn into flames on my stole. And in Luke there is no angel to help him. He has no such need.

Jesus ate nothing, remember; *chose* to eat nothing during the forty days, a true fast, and that provides the reason for the **first** temptation. At the end, Luke says 'He was famished' (NRSV). The tempter offers the thought: With the present help of One who created the cosmos out of nothing, a stone into a loaf of bread would be easy. Jesus replies, as he does in each Gospel, with a scriptural quotation, from Deuteronomy, pitting God's word against his prosecutor.

The **second** temptation is the stuff of a certain kind of movie: world domination, but then, truthfully, at the cost of becoming a vassal of the Satan (the Hebrew word for ‘devil’). Recently, the Pope’s attribution of the sins of the clergy to the devil’s work was not intended (as the media suggested) to lay the blame elsewhere.

It is the **last** temptation, the climax of the series, which is the most demonic of all, for it is to tempt God. We often hear of what God requires of us – but what can we require of God? And this time, the devil himself begins with a Scripture quotation: ‘for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone”’, both of which are from Psalm 91. It is no more than a test; there is no promise attached to it. I dare you, says smiling Satan. ‘But this you do not do’, says Jesus, quoting Deut. 6:16, and Satan vanishes – but note the ending of the sentence: ‘he departed from him until an opportune time.’ Gethsemane perhaps.

This last sober truth is why we observe Lent. For many of us, most of our life is spent in a land of milk and honey. We have enough bread. We don’t need to compete with a neighbour for scarce resources. The Homeland Security ministry means we live in relative peace and quiet. Which should remind us that we gain most of this by bowing the knee to the gods of this world, Mammon, and those who make the world secure by threats and intimidation.

They haven’t delivered what they promised: even in our part of the world, as one commentator has put it, ‘we still bury too many of our young thanks to accidents, disease or plain foolishness’. We would like some messiah ‘who could leap not just the Kidron Valley, but the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Chasm of Cancer, and the Abyss of Accident and Tragedy, so that we could all have our threescore years and ten and die in our beds, with grandchildren all about to sing us a sweet benediction.’ But that’s not where we live.

Last week, we noted that the wonderful story of the Transfiguration was followed by Jesus being confronted by a boy in the clutches of a demon. We do not live on the mountain, but in a real world, and it is there that we must offer our thanksgiving, in the presence of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the presence of desert trials. That is our context of praise.

As Andrew Gador-Whyte movingly said in his sermon last week,

‘And the Father says to each of us as he says to that boy: “You are to me as my Son Jesus is to me. Though in the world’s darkness your glory is hidden, yet from the foundation of the world, I have known you as daughter, as son”.

If anything separates us from life as child, as heir, of this God, Jesus has been there for us at Golgotha. Though we have forgotten our glory, Jesus has remembered who we are.’

The challenge of this Lenten journey is once more to hold on to that truth, and to do likewise.
