

Sermon Lent 1 18.02.24 CC

‘Yes, but what do **you** want’, the palliative care nurse asked the patient. I’d been brought in to the conversation because there was a major difference of opinion within the family. One element thought that the patient, whose cancer had spread to several organs, ought to receive as much intervention as medically possible. The other view was represented by family members who said let nature take its course. The patient, a former member of this parish, felt utterly torn, not wanting to side with or hurt one or the other faction among her children,. Yes, but what do **you** want, asked the nurse, gently but firmly.

What do we want? It’s a good question to ask at the beginning of these 40 days of Lent. It’s a question we need to ask repeatedly, lest we drift semi-consciously through life. What do I want?.

It’s a question that Jesus clearly asks in light of today’s Gospel reading. He’s been baptised by John, thereby recognising John’s integrity and prophetic role. Baptised, not just as Peter reminds us in his letter, just to wash away dirt, but to strip away encrusted presuppositions and conditioning. And now he is ‘immediately’ driven out, thrown out into the wilderness. This is not some alternative, retreat centre- carrot juice and yoga, this is real danger country. The wilderness, the desert, which surrounds Jerusalem, was riddled with threats to survival- wild animals, holed up bandits, insects, scorching heat, bitter cold, no water, no shelter, a real place of testing. Indeed , forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, for all its symbolic linkage to the forty years of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, would have been far from a walk in the park. It is the place of exile, of loss and distress- it is above all the place of testing. And that’s the word that Mark uses here- testing, trying out, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness for a period of trial- what do you really want.

The Gospel reading tells us that he completed this testing time, by returning home, to Galilee and saying ‘the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is come near’. This reflection, this testing of what Jesus wants results in a commitment to be the one through whom we can see the presence of God breaking in. Indeed Mark uses the word Kairos for this time, that is this moment, this juncture, this pivotal point, not a time you

can read on a watch or from the sun's place in the sky, but a moment of fundamental change. This man commits himself to living the divine, the timeless way in the midst of passing time, as significant as the rainbow given to Noah as a sign of God's constant solidarity.

What do **you** really want? Perhaps Lent is a very good time to ask the question- what's important to me, what are my true priorities, what should the priorities for our common life as the Body of Christ be here at CC and SL? Family, loves, friendships, job, career, bank account, love of neighbour, how to live faithfully in the midst of complex political struggle. I'm not suggesting that you'll get it all worked out neatly in the next 40 days (actually you've only got 36 days of Lent left now), but I am suggesting that a time of trial, of asking the questions, what do I really want, what am I committed to, is worth the honest hard slog.

And if you get started with the questioning and give up (just like most of us will fail on the chocolate or the booze or the coffee shop) don't worry, because there's another reminder- ha, strange that. Yes, another reminder- almost at the last moment. For just as Mark uses this word trial or testing [peirazo] for the period of decision at the beginning of Jesus ministry, so he uses it again close to the end- in the Garden of gethsemane. This same word re-appears- as if these were the two ends of Noah's rainbow, spanning the entire Gospel with this notion of testing- what do we really want, what are you prepared to commit yourself to- in light of the entire ministry of Jesus, his life and his passion and death- questions we need to go on wrestling with throughout our lives and in every part of them- questions Jesus struggled with and as we also must. When the disciples fall asleep, Jesus comes to them and says What's going on- 'watch and pray' for this is the testing time, when Jesus commits himself to walk the way which is coming, not to run away, not to retract anything, not to dilute anything, not to shy away from the consequences, but to live through the time of testing in order to complete his offering of unconditional love.

The time of searching, testing- what do **you** really want. It needs work in answering that question, it needs time, it needs energy and commitment.

Having been through the trial of watching fascism unfold across Europe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided he must return to Germany in the late 1930's if he was to be faithful to Christ and his church. In his book 'The Cost of Discipleship' he wrote 'Cheap Grace is the deadly enemy of the church (the body of Christ), we must stand for costly Grace' What do **you** really want? With what cost might we be prepared to stand with Christ- you and I. Now is a good time to start asking the question.