

Lent 1: JESUS and the DEVIL

Luke 4:1-13 [MW19/10]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 03 March 2019

After one Ash Wednesday service I went into town and while waiting at the bank

- a guy asked me about the mark on my forehead
 - I said it was it was a cross, marked in ash
 - he had never heard of Ash Wednesday or Lent and he was interested, intrigued
 - I explained about how we have Palm Crosses on the Sunday before Easter
 - reminding us of how Jesus was welcomed and cheered
 - the way they did things back in those days, by waving palm branches
 - and how we use the symbol of the cross made out of palm or flax
 - because we who follow Jesus welcome and cheer him
 - and also let him down, let others down, let ourselves down
 - and are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation and new beginnings
 - which is what Easter is all about

In fact Easter is so important we prepare for it, I told this guy

- we seriously prepare for it
 - with a time we call “Lent” which begins on Ash Wednesday
- we recall the ancient tradition of people showing they were sorry for the wrongs they had done, showing “repentance”
 - by wearing sackcloth and heaping ashes on their head
- we burn last year’s palm crosses
 - and use the ash to mark ourselves with the sign of the cross
 - as a sign of our repentance and that we are willing to examine our lives
 - and realign ourselves with the one we claim to follow

Now this guy could see the sense in that ... for me, if not for himself

- that if you say you are a follower of Jesus
 - it is vital to take some time, make an effort, to see how it is going
- that if you say Easter is the most important celebration
 - far more important than Christmas
 - the pivotal event of the life and faith we share ...
- then there needs to be some opportunity, encouragement, plan for doing just that ... and there is:
 - the season of Lent!

Just before I go on, I’d like to share with you a thought that came to me

- as we had the Ash Wednesday service the other day
 - it struck me as the palm crosses were burnt, smoke billowing just out there
 - not nice, comfortable reasonable smelling incense
 - rather harsh, aggravating, cough-inducing smoke
- and as my hands got dirty with the ashes made by the crosses ...
 - it struck me that every other celebration we have in the church is “clean”
- Ash Wednesday is not
 - it is centred on ashes, burning, remains
 - it is hands on dirty stuff
 - it smelly, smoky, flames, black and soot

A reminder at the beginning of this distinctive season in our church year

- that following Jesus is not nice, neat, clean, tidy
 - a reminder that our lives, even of the very best and most devout followers of Jesus contain soot, stains and smells ...
- and that Lent is a good time to deal with this through the cross
 - the cross in ash on the forehead is a mark of our fall and of our redemption

That sounds really important, the guy said

- do you have special readings or something to kick it all off?
 - do we have special readings?!
 - do we what! yes indeed! just like this morning's gospel reading
- Jesus spent forty days preparing for his ministry as Son of God and Saviour
 - and we spend forty days preparing for our ministry as a faithful follower

This account of Jesus in the desert, in the wilderness

- going without eating, facing up to everything that came his way
 - tells us that this is real
- our faith is based on a real person who lived as we live
 - and who faced the things that we face
 - and because he triumphed, we can too!

Jesus in the desert is as dirty, sooty, smelly as Ash Wednesday

- it is grounded, earthed
 - something we can identify with, because it happens to us too!
- and it seems to me we don't have to go out to the desert
 - we don't have to wait forty days
 - we don't even have to go out of our way
 - to look for this kind of difficulty and struggle
- on no! all too easily this kind of thing finds us ...

So, Jesus is out in the wilderness and who does he meet out there?

- the Devil
 - Jesus faced the tough times just like we all do
 - he confronted the Devil head on
- and let's not gloss over this, not think it was easy for Jesus
 - because it wasn't, it wasn't ...

Who here has fasted, gone without food?

- for how long? how was that for you???

Let me just read again the second verse of our gospel reading:

For forty days Jesus was tested by the devil, and during that time he went without eating.

When it was all over, he was hungry.

I had not noticed that before

- Jesus was tested for forty days by the devil
 - up until the bit we have recorded Jesus was being tested, for forty days
 - what was the devil doing?
- and when that was over, and Jesus had not even made the slightest stumble
 - Jesus was very, very hungry

It was just about over but the Devil saved the best for last:

- Jesus has been exerting himself against everything the Devil could throw at him
he is tired, hungry ... and the Devil offers him bread
- not from himself, he doesn't bring out a fresh oven-warm loaf
and wave it under Jesus' nose
- what does he do?
the devil says to Jesus, you're the son of God
use your power, your position, just a little - for yourself

Jesus is really, really hungry

- Jesus could really, really turn stones into bread
he could really do this ... and he doesn't
he doesn't!
- the Devil made a good case: no one would be hurt, one person would be saved
where is the harm in that, what's the problem ...?

If I'm ever tempted in a similar way, if you're ever tempted in a similar way

- just remember Jesus stood up to it
after forty days of hard testing and being nearly faint from hunger
Jesus stood up to it and stood firm
- surely I can, surely you can too

Then the Devil says to Jesus

- surely you deserve some reward after all you've been through
and the devil shows him a few things that he might like
- may be there are times when you feel you didn't get the reward
or recognition you deserved
- times when you need a little 'shot in the arm', some encouragement
surely there is no harm in that
no harm in taking matters into our own hands
no harm in enjoying a perk or two ...
- again, Jesus stood firm
and because he did, we can too

The beginning of Lent is a down-to-earth time to be confronted with the realities of life

- yes, we say we are faithful ... but often we are not
things are not always simple and straight forward
it is not always easy to recognise temptation
- sometimes we get our hands, and more, dirty
we doubt that we are on the right path, that God cares, that God is even there

Today we are reminded this is not a cause for despair, rather a shining ray of hope

- Jesus faced up to the testing of the desert and the devil, and overcame them all
and he did it for us
so that when we are confronted by these same challenges, struggles and temptations
they will not destroy us
- yes the enemy is out there, and real
Jesus has faced and overcome the enemy, the devil
and because he did, we can too!

Here's a little 'monologue' (imagine me as 'the Devil' - put hat on)

(The Devil stares into audience as if he sees Jesus there.)

So, Jesus, you've been out here in the desert for 40 days - without food even. I hate to say it, old buddy, but you look it. *(Flicks an imaginary speck of dust from his clothes.)*

Rumour's going around that you've been hearing voices claiming you're the son of God. Sad. Very sad. Some people tell me that you were baptized in the river by that weird guy - you know, the one who eats locusts. And that you said you saw the heavens open up and the spirit of God floating down like a dove. Come on. Do you BELIEVE that stuff?

(Listens)

Are you kidding me? Man, you're out of it. Maybe it's because you're so hungry. I'll tell you what. If you ARE the son of God, order those stones over there to turn into bread and you can eat all you want.

(Listens)

What's that? Man cannot live by bread alone, but needs every word that God speaks? Hey, good line. Mind if I use it sometime?

So here you are, the son of God. Really. Are you sure? Don't you have the teeniest little doubt? Tell the truth, wouldn't you like to know for sure? Why don't I help you prove it? I'll take you up to the highest point of the temple. Then you can jump off. Not to worry. You know the scripture says that God will order his angels to hold you up with their hands so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones. That is, of course, IF you are the son of God.

Oh, don't put the Lord to the test, huh? Right. I don't blame you. I wouldn't try it either. Still, if you really were the son of God

But, listen, buddy. I like you. You've got ... charisma, style, people listen to you. I'll tell you what. Come in with me and you can have anything you want, women, more money than you can ever spend. You'll be rich, powerful. You can be president or king. Name it, it's yours. Why waste your time studying at the synagogue and working all your life for some future you can't really be sure of when you can have it all right now? All you've got to do is remember who's boss. Me!

(Listens) (Jumps back.)

Away from me, Devil! You'll worship and serve only God? Ooooo. I'm SO impressed with your holiness. Well, don't say you never have the opportunity to make it big.

Just remember, buddy, even if you won't listen to me, there are others who will. Lots of others. And they're everywhere. So, if you should change your mind, just whistle. One of us may even be sitting at your table.

[take hat off – space for reflection]

Because He did, we can too!

- as we go on the journey to Easter
let us remember that unlike Jesus we are not alone out there
look around, we go in good company
and we go with Jesus

Let us pray:

Eternal God, we have answered your call, and have said that we will follow you.

*But sometimes we are afraid that we have involved ourselves in a life
which is too much for us.*

*Help us to a firmer resolution, to follow our Lord so closely
that life shall not crowd him from sight.*

And, as we keep him in view, put strength in our feet and joy in our heart. Amen.