

First Sunday in Lent – St James, Curtin
Jesus in the wilderness
Luke 4.1-13

As I learn the importance and practices of paying more attention in life I find myself becoming increasingly interested in words and their meanings.

Take the word *religion*, for example. It tends to have fairly negative connotations these days, describing something formal, impersonal, somewhat archaic, and ideological. But that's not what religion is. The word comes from the Latin *re-ligio*, meaning to re-bind or re-connect. The word *ligament* comes from the same root and we only have to tear one to know what ligaments do!

If our spiritual beliefs and practices have the effect of reinforcing a sense of alienation from God, ourselves and others, including the environment, if they cause us to divide the world into right and wrong, good and bad, superior and inferior, then they are not religious in the true sense. True religion, reconciles – it binds and heals, *remembers* and *renews* – true religion is about *communion*, *community*, *compassion*... *co-creation*. The *co-* or *com-* in these words means *with*, it's about connecting and collaborating.

In fact, when our so-called religion generates gaps by fuelling alienation and hostility, a better word to use for its effects is *diabolical*, for that word (from the Gk: *dia balein*) means to *throw apart*. And 'ain't that interesting, for that's the root that gives us the word *devil*.

Well, on the first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary raises us all of this in narrative form. The story of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by

the devil is a story of the temptation we all face to choose alienation (our own and other's) in place of true reconciliation.

Last week, I listened to a very interesting talk by Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, which I think helps us open up this familiar story in fresh way. In part of his talk Rohr spoke about what he called our 'programs for happiness'. Briefly, he suggests that we human beings have 3 primary patterns by which we seek happiness, around which we organise our lives, and to which we become deeply attached and addicted.

First, there's the survival and security program. Those who favour this approach strive, in different ways to secure their lives as an impregnable fortress against any form of scarcity or uncertainty, a fortress built of wealth, plenty of supplies, superannuation, property and so on. These people love predictability, rules and routine. Basically, they do what they can to minimise risk and cushion life. They worry about being caught out, caught short and not having enough. The security addicts need 'just that little bit more' to be happy – or so they think.

The second group seek happiness through control; we sometimes call them 'control freaks.' In different ways these people seek and use status and power to order and secure their world, they love to enforce the rules, they are organisers and directors; they have numerous mechanisms for managing and manipulating people – from tears to temper tantrums to passive resistance and silent pouting, we sometimes call them power games. These people don't like chaos, vulnerability or insubordination, they're wary of spontaneity and innovation (unless, of course, they're driving it). Just get things under control and they'll be happy – or so they think.

The third crowd are the approval addicts. Their program for happiness revolves around attention and affirmation. They love to be praised and appreciated. This is my tribe. You pat me on the head and I'm yours! I'll walk on hot coals for you, I'll do almost anything, so long as you keep loving me, admiring me, telling me I'm alright. People like us work very hard to make sure you will never disapprove. If you do, if you snub us or tell us we're bad or criticise us, even slightly, we are offended and get very upset. We just can't understand why you don't like us. We may not show it but we dwell on it for days, and then we do everything we can to prove you wrong. Just keep appreciating and affirming us and we'll be happy – or so we think.

Well, I wonder do you relate to any of these programs? Any other approval junkies here? Wonderful people you are!!! What about control freaks? Any security addicts? In truth, all of us have all three patterns but usually one dominates.

Now, why am I telling you this? I'm sharing it because I believe it's pertinent to our text and to possibilities for our Lenten journey. When I ponder the story of Jesus in the wilderness, I see these same patterns being addressed in the three diabolical temptations.

Turning stones into bread is all about survival and securing your life against threat, in this case, starvation. And yet surely it's symbolic of all our attempts to secure life, from food to finances, from locks and insurance policies to nuclear bombs. Yes, we have legitimate needs – but how quickly our deep insecurity possesses us.

The second temptation addresses the issue of control. The glory and authority of the kingdoms of the world is all about power. Wow, just think of it. How happy we control freaks could be! Everything working

just as we like it – all the trains on time; no one to upset us, nothing to catch us off guard, no more mess or resistance ... what's not to like about that!

And then there's the invitation to leap from the temple pinnacle, followed by a dramatic rescue - from a legion of angels no less! That's impressive, not only would it prove that God really affirms you – you *are* the Son of God! The crowd would love you too, they'd follow you, adore you! Ahhh, bring it on!!!

Now, if Jesus is fully human, truly one of us, it makes sense that he would be lured by these patterns too. But, what makes them such a problem? If these programs make us happy then why not pursue them? Why is it that a key element of the spiritual life, remember it was the Spirit who led Jesus into this – why so important that we face and let this stuff go?

The truth is, of course, these patterns don't ultimately make us happy, or human. They don't lead to contentment, communion or community – quite the opposite, in fact they're diabolical – they rip us apart, causing us to be anxious, selfish, competitive, even violent. Our need for security so quickly leads to greed, our need for control to abuse and corruption, our need for approval to manipulation. These patterns, tempting as they are, are really illusions; they don't reflect true religion, they don't reconnect us with the ultimate source of life or with each other and they don't make us happy. In truth, they are intrinsically unstable – almost entirely dependent upon external factors over which we have limited control.

Jesus came proclaiming reality, the reality of love and grace. To become responsive to this reality, which is what the spiritual life is all about, is

to be asked to let go of our fraught projects of self-making, to stop feeding our basic addictions and to learn to receive life as a gift. It is to my live as an adventure in trust, as a soulful act of worship. Of course, if Jesus was to offer this as a possibility for us, he needed to be free of these patterns too, which is why he is led into the wilderness. As Richard Rohr is fond of saying, only transformed people can participate in the transformation of others.

Jesus *knew* this deeper reality but could he live from it? Would he keep trusting – drawing from it when the pressure was really on? The answer is yes, and, of course that's the invitation of Lent to us as well. To be thoroughly disillusion (dis-illusioned) in order to be liberated – set free from our unstable patterns of self-making in order that we might finally set forth on *our* adventure of trust.

So, how do we begin? How do we let go of a lifetime of addiction? Well, naming it is a good start. Getting real means being honest. Name it. Notice how it works – what are the triggers, when are you most vulnerable?

Then, let yourself be with the discomfort of your fear, your uneasiness, you anxiety. Instead of feeding or fixing it, instead of defending and indulging, face it head on, move towards it... expose it.

If security is your vice, then deliberately give something away.

If it's control, then let something go, stop being responsible, take your hand off the wheel, empower someone else.

If it's affirmation, and you've just been overlooked or slighted, suck it in and let it pass.

Day after day, let these practices be your Lenten discipline. And then, when life does it to you anyway (as it inevitably will) you'll be ready, or at least a bit.

In my own life I've come to contemplation as the most poignant practice of all. Deliberately silencing my desperate ego for a few minutes each day. It's amazing how it purges the system. I'm learning to live from a deeper, truer source and slowly... slowly I am changing – thank God.

When Jesus returned from the wilderness, Luke says, he was 'filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.' Having refused these tempting programs for happiness he is far from depleted, paradoxically, he is *alive*, renewed and ready. It's not the end of the struggle, the struggle with unreality never completely ends, but it is a start.

That's the promise of Lent for us as well: *aliveness!*

An opportunity to let go of illusion... to live *from* and *in* reality, with all its transforming potential...

An invitation to draw deeply from the wells of salvation...

L'chaim - to life!

Friends... let us drink!

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