

09 March 2025 Lent 1 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

"DO NOT LET US FALL INTO TEMPTATION"

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

The Season of Lent began on Ash Wednesday. The season of Lent will last for forty days and six Sundays.

On Ash Wednesday we held a short service here at St Columba's attended by a group of us from this congregation.

In that short service we used the ashes of a palm leaf saved from a previous Palm Sunday service. I saved the palm branch and burnt the dry leaves, to make the ashes for Ash Wednesday.

During that short service I invited people to come forward for what is called, 'The Imposition of Ashes'. I made a cross on their foreheads using the ashes and said the words:

'Remember that from dust you came, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the gospel.'

The service was very sombre and introspective, reminding us of our own mortality and focused on repentance, as a way of drawing near to God.

That is what we do during the season of Lent. We repent, so that we can draw near to God.

I reminded the lovely people who attended Ash Wednesday that the number 'forty', when used in the Bible, usually signified a period of transformation.

The 40 days of rain in the Story time of Noah transformed the Earth. Israel's 40 years in the wilderness moulded them into a nation. Jesus 40 days in the wilderness solidified his faith, his identity and his mission.

Hopefully, as we follow Christ to the cross during the 40 days of Lent, we will undergo our own mini transformation.

Our readings today are about acknowledging God's mercy in the past and present, being thankful, and drawing close to God despite all the

temptations which can keep us from loving God and loving our neighbour.

In our first reading from Deuteronomy Chapter 26 , credited to Moses, the people of Israel have yet to enter the Promised Land.

Moses instructs them as to how they are to behave once they have occupied the Promised Land.

They are to remember God's goodness .They are to remember their humble beginnings in their ancestor Abraham. They are to remember and celebrate the history of God's faithfulness to them.

, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD,.....the LORD heard our voice ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey'.(Deut 26: 4b-9).

Because they were once aliens themselves, they are instructed by Moses to include all aliens in their midst, when they celebrate the bounty which the Lord has given them .

We remember that Moses was a 'triple ' alien. A man who lived in three cultures. He was raised believing he was an Egyptian prince.

He then discovered that he was a Hebrew. Killed an Egyptian who he saw mistreating a Hebrew slave. Was forced to flee from Egypt.

He fled to the land of Midian , where he was adopted by a Midianite priest – Jethro and his family. Moses ended up marrying Jethro's daughter and living as a foreigner among the Midianites. When he returned to Egypt, he was treated as an alien by Pharoah.

So Moses was an Egyptian. He was a Midianite, and he was a Hebrew.

Today, with all the movements of people from one country to another – 'globalisation' (migration for economic and other reasons e.g. war) there

are many people even in Aotearoa NZ, who have multiple identities, who have lived in more than one country. And I think it's a good thing.

When you're an alien, like Moses, you understand other people from other cultures and religions. You understand the plight of refugees. You become an international citizen. And you appreciate the Promised Land. (which for many of us is ANZ).

We know that Moses never set foot in the Promised Land, but in this, one of his farewell discourses – Moses tells the people how they are to behave once they have occupied the Promised Land.

They are to remember their humble beginnings. They are to celebrate God's bounty and include the foreigners who live among them. They are to dedicate their first fruits to God via the Levites - the priests and guardians of the tablets of the Law housed in the Ark of the Covenant.

We can take Moses' advice – be grateful for God's mercy shown to us in the past. Dedicate the first fruits of prosperity to God. Remember that our ancestors (Caucasian , Polynesian, Melanesian , Asian and African) were once aliens in this land. Finally, celebrate God's goodness in acts of worship and acts of kindness towards others.

In our second reading from St Paul's Letter to the growing church in Rome, Paul reminds the church that Christ is a universal Christ.

Rome was probably one of the most cosmopolitan cities of its time. The Roman church would have reflected that diversity. It was made up converts from many cultures including Jews , Greeks, Romans and many other races and cultures from all over the Roman Empire.

Paul reminds the Church that Christ is a universal saviour.

¹¹The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. God plays no favourites. The Lord is generous to all who call on him.

Our Final reading, from the gospel of Luke 4:1-13 is of course the Story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

About two years ago Pope Francis commented on the English version of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, which uses the phrase, "Lead us not into temptation...."

The Pope, quite rightly, pointed out that it was bad theology. God never leads us into temptation. We lead ourselves into temptation.

A better rendering of that clause would be: 'Do not let us fall into temptation.'

The Temptation Story in the gospels is about the use of power and the choices we make.

Luke's gospel tells us that, '4Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil'.

Jesus was full of the power of the Holy spirit – In other words, he was not being tested from a position of weakness- but from a position of strength. Jesus was full of the power of the Holy Spirit!

In the wilderness, Jesus had some choices to make. His biggest choice was: 'How would he use the power of the Holy Spirit, that was conferred on him at his baptism?'

Would he use his new-found power to provide food and material goods himself and for the starving? A short-term answer to the world's ills.

Would he use his power to impress people and make a name for himself by acts of intrigue? In this case, by leaping down from the Temple.

Would he bow down to the powers of evil – personified by Satan - and gain glory for himself?

Today, we might see this Story of Jesus' temptations as a kind of psychodrama, where Jesus was wrestling with voices within himself – voices pulling him this way and that way.

I think we all go through periods in our lives where we wrestle with what are 'ultimate' choices, or life-changing choices.

When you're young, it is career choices; choosing a partner. Choosing a country, or a place to live in. Choosing friends. Choosing a lifestyle. Choosing what values to live by.

For someone raised in a Christian home. It may be deciding whether to be an atheist? Or a theist? Or an agnostic? Or whether to embrace some form of Christian faith. Not necessarily the faith or denomination of your parents.

These are choices that decide the future direction of our lives.

Even as older adults, we might find that our 'old' faith doesn't fit with our experience any more – and we begin to deconstruct and reconstruct our faith, jettisoning, or throwing out, those parts of our faith that no longer have meaning for us.

I think we have all done this to some extent, as we have grown older. The wonder is, that faith, or the spiritual impulse, continues to live in us. The Spirit continues to live in us.

Q. How do we handle the power that God has given us? Do we live for ourselves? Or do we live for some higher objective? Do we worship the God who is love? Or do we bow down to our lower nature? To the Prince of darkness within us?

These are some of the questions we must ask ourselves, not only in this Season of Lent, but throughout our Christian Journey, as we journey with Jesus to the Cross and ultimately to his death and to his resurrection.

To God be the Glory.

PRAYER

God of deliverance and freedom,
you taught the people of Israel

to acknowledge that all things
come from your bountiful hand.
Deepen our faith
so that we may resist temptation
and, in the midst of trial,
proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,
now and for ever. **Amen.**