

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 10th March 2019
11am Rev Peter Cornick

The theme for the first Sunday in Lent was

'Journeys through the wilderness'

The worship was based around several 'journeys.' Two are offered below together with the Homily.

The first journey is written by Miriam Kennedy. It is an imaginative retelling of the true story of a woman from North East Africa, who has been receiving help from the West London Mission.

The second journey is a meditation, reflecting the 'Devil's' point of view, written by Rev. Peter Cornick.

Peter's Homily then reflects the scripture readings for the day, Deuteronomy 26.1-11 and Luke 4:1-13, and reflects on Miriam's poem.

My Boys

Searching the path ahead of me, my head and heart are torn in two directions.
The dirt from the men's boots still making an impression on my taste buds.
Dust under my nail from the prison cell I was chained to...
I must flee....Each step could keep them safe....my boys.

Those last hugs, their soft little hands touching my face as I cry into them,
I inhale the smell of their hair, gaze at the speckles of every colour in their eyes,
Tossing kisses into the air as I scuttle off into my wilderness...
I am bereft...Each step I make keeps them safer....my boys.

My feet step forward moving further from danger,
Yet further away from my content heart, my whole self, my vocation,
I journey through the dust of the desert, the morning dew of the jungle
Each step I make keeps them safer....my boys.

The clashing sounds of the city life,
The smell of brewed coffee bouncing in the air of the station
The sight of many shoes stampeding in the morning hours
Each step I make in this city keeps them safer....my boys..

I cling to my phone with memories of my life,
Their faces in school uniform, my smile of optimism in our wedding photo
Swiping through the images of a time when I had choice
Each step I make keeps them safer...my boys.

The smell of onions, cooking in the kitchen,
A smile from a familiar face, a space to tell my story-
This is my shelter family for now- I have company in the waiting
Each step I make keeps them safer....my boys.

My wilderness was lonesome, the dryness of life was deadly,
Yet I see hope, glimmers of this new land being our refuge...
Someday we will walk in the dewy grass of Greenwich Park and throw a Frisbee...
We will be safe and whole- my boys and I.

A story - 'The Devil's journey'

A tree giving knowledge of good and evil. God expressly said; 'do not eat from it.' But, tempting, isn't it, to know right from wrong; whose side to be on in a dispute. Justice would be served; integrity upheld. Wisdom: what a gift.

The woman took the fruit; fed the man. They discovered their nakedness before God; before each other. Imagine! Trying to hide from God behind a tree.

Temptation works best when it leads us into temptation. The man blamed the woman: the woman blamed a harmless snake.

The journey had begun.

Wandering Arameans, lived in Egypt as migrant workers. Harshly treated, escaped to the desert; Israelites set free; no longer bound; enslaved. But freedom brings responsibility and choice. The temptation to believe oppression was more desirable. The temptation to turn on those who led them into the wilderness.

So little food; yet God's bountiful provision - manna. The Israelites were tempted to hoard - a security against want tomorrow. A temptation leading to decay; both of food; and of communal trust.

A journey of temptation into the wilderness.

And now, this Jesus. A carpenter's son from Nazareth, famished in the desert, believes he is the Son of God. Yet; wracked with self-doubt. Why not a miracle to prove it; perhaps power is tempting ... if you are the son of God.

And yet he resists temptation. The Son, worshipping and serving the Father; full of the Holy Spirit. Not testing God; but embracing the vulnerability of being God in human flesh.

A journey into suffering.

Is he up to the journey; or will he want the cup taken away? That will be the opportune time.

Homily: The wilderness journey of temptation

Jesus; recently baptized, returning from the Jordan, heard God's voice: 'You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased'.

Jesus in the wilderness; famished; hears a different voice – one which is alluring: 'If you are the Son of God' ...

Jesus, on the cross, hears another voice: 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.'

The challenge for Jesus, in his journey, from baptism to cross, is to be true to his calling, without succumbing to temptation.

If we think of temptations, perhaps, we think of chocolate (following discussion earlier in service). And yet, to give up chocolate, speaks of our wealth and privilege – a paradise for many. Fortunate enough to live in paradise, we throw away a third of it. The temptation of our paradise – is not that it is wrong to eat – chocolate, in moderation, is not bad – the temptation is our complacency.

It takes a visitor to the West London Mission (pointing out our paradise), to alert us to temptation. We are rightly serving that visitor at the point of need; likewise, the woman who kissed goodbye to 'My Boys' – what she has given up for her personal security. Our visitors offer us a perspective that challenges our temptation. The temptation to forget that for many of us, we are indeed, living a privileged life. The Israelites were tempted to forget how the Lord had brought them out of Egypt. To a land flowing with milk and honey – paradise indeed. Bringing the first fruits as an offering helped them overcome that temptation to forget how they had suffered, and how they had been delivered.

All this points us to a reality about temptation. Temptation is, so reasonable. And this is so with Jesus.

Jesus is invited to make bread from stones ... 'If you are the Son of God.' For Jesus, encountering people who are hungry, or in need of healing, a quick miracle – a divine intervention – would fix the immediate problem. Surely, the end would justify the means. Jesus is here, not being tempted to do something profoundly evil and wrong. He is being tempted to take the short cut; to offer cheap bread rather than seeing the needs of the whole person.

There is a temptation to believe we alone can fix the visitors I mentioned. The truth is, many agencies and much time have only begun to help them address their needs. When the answer seems simple, we probably haven't listened to the question; whether it be addressing a visitor to the West London Mission or asking how we reduce our consumption of food or single use plastics.

The end for Jesus, is to feed the hungry – a noble end. But not by the temptation of any means.

Jesus is invited to look at all the kingdoms of the world. Take them all. Surely, if they were all under God's reign, the journey to the kingdom would be a lot quicker.

But at what cost?

Fintan O'Toole in his book about Brexit¹, describes how Britain, or more specifically, England, was tempted into lusting after the kingdoms of the world, for its own ends. The empire, won by brutal suppression, was now lost. England mourned this loss. He argues that England needed to blame someone for its loss of power in the world. Europe became a convenient scapegoat. Perversely, having once been content to colonize, England now objected to what it saw as colonization by Europe. England turned itself into the victim, and Europe into the oppressor. Brexit, argues O'Toole, buys into this distorted narrative.

Yet, with remarkable conceit, the champions of Brexit also believed, a free UK would be able to trade with – you guessed it – its old colonies; no doubt at a price beneficial to the UK.

It is ironic that the Brexit narrative promised a restoration of perceived former glory and of course, a restoration of authority – or control. Exactly what Jesus is being tempted by. Such a quick win would make Jesus popular. The Jewish people were desperately seeking a restoration of their fortunes, and the banishment of Rome's power. But Jesus is not to be tempted.

Finally, Jesus finds himself on the pinnacle of the Temple. Jump off. If you are the Son of God, surely, you will be saved. It is tempting to want proof; objective evidence.

The voice Jesus hears, offers him Psalm 91. Taken in isolation, here is a theology which broadly says, believe God, and everything will be OK. 'Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.' But consider pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered by the Nazis, or Esther John, who had converted to Christianity in Pakistan, became a nurse and was murdered. Consider Jesus. Psalm 38 is not as triumphalist as 91. After a series of woes and defeats, the Psalmist ends with a plaintive cry: 'Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, do not be far from me.' There is no triumphalist last verse.

For Jesus, the temptation is to reduce God or scripture to a religious lucky charm. For Jesus, it is not about testing God; not about making an exception; the wilderness, and later the cross, is about suffering as God. This is part of God's reality.

¹ Fintan O'Toole, Heroic Failure, Brexit and the politics of pain, Croydon 2018

Jesus' journey is one of temptation in the wilderness. Temptation to take the short cut. To avoid the complexity of human need. To achieve desirable ends by any means. To short change scripture and God. We would be deceiving ourselves if we think these temptations are confined to the wilderness of Judea. Do we not find these temptations in the wilderness of our journey, at work; at home; at church.