

Shortcuts and Hard Yards

A sermon on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 5 February 2017

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Lent is a recurrent reminder of the fragility of our discipleship in the face of tempting shortcuts and instant gratifications.

Sermon

On the kid's trolley today there is a story book called *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek*. The story tells of a bunyip who crawls out of the murk at the bottom of the creek one day and doesn't know what he is. In order to find out what he is, he begins asking all the creatures he encounters. Some of them are able to tell him that he's a bunyip, but when he asks them what buniyps are like, they are less than helpful, telling him only that buniyps are horrible or even that buniyps don't really exist. It is only when another bunyip crawls out of the murky depths and begins to ask the same "who am I?" question, that the bunyip is able to understand and begin celebrating who he is.

One of the reasons that the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden is such a powerful and enduring story is because it too holds up a mirror and enables us to recognise ourselves and know ourselves.

About the most useless thing you can do with the Adam and Eve story, is to spend your time wondering what life would have been like if they hadn't eaten the fruit. This profoundly true story is not trying to reconstruct a historical incident, but to describe why it is that we humans are so well acquainted with both good and evil. Why is it that creatures who have been made in the image of God have such a fatal fascination with those things that are, for very good reasons, off-limits?

In grappling with this question the story-teller suggests that perhaps there might have been a time when humans had no concept of evil; when evil was something we had never encountered and couldn't have begun to imagine. But one of the points of the story is that you could no more imagine what that would feel like than get a good feel for what it would be like not to know who you were because you had never met another human being. Our awareness of evil, in its whole spectrum from the subtle and almost harmless deceit to the calculated genocide, is quite simply as much a part of us, as our awareness of our own selves.

Even if we could begin to imagine it, the Christian life has got nothing to do with hankering after some mythical memory of the good old days before we knew evil. The Christian life is not about trying to turn the clock back, but about preparing us to live with integrity in the real world now so that we might prepare ourselves and our surrounds for the coming of a new day when justice and peace will relegate evil to the place of mythical memory.

The season of Lent, whose beginning we marked last Wednesday, is an annual call to take seriously the difficulty of living such a life. It calls us to make sure that we are not viewing the Christian life through rose coloured glasses, but have got our feet firmly on the ground and are facing up squarely to the challenges of a life that defies many of the accepted norms and assumptions of the culture that surrounds us and constantly seeks to reclaim us.

The Genesis story tells us, up front, that the lure of living some way other than that which God has called us to, is a universal human experience. And the story of the temptation of Jesus that we heard from Matthew's Gospel tonight tells us that our Lord and Messiah himself had to wrestle with some seriously tempting alternative courses of action. So if nothing else, let's make sure we do not fall for the idea that, as followers of Jesus, it will be somehow easier for us to recognise and therefore reject the wrong pathways.

Far from that, these stories should serve to warn us that when evil tempts us, it is seldom easy to recognise. The temptations that face us are hardly ever to do something that is obviously evil. The snake did not come to Eve in the garden and suggest that it might be a good idea and lots of fun to find out what thumbing her nose at God was like. Rather the snake suggested that eating the fruit would be a shortcut to great wisdom, and how could possessing such wisdom be wrong when it would make one more God-like?

The things that Jesus was tempted with were not obviously wrong. The tempter didn't suggest that he torture his opponents, or tell slanderous lies about refugees, or abuse children. Instead he was tempted with the idea of using his gifts to cut a few corners and speed up the achievement of a few worthy goals.

We live in an age when we are surrounded by promises of instant results and gratification on tap; an age where those who can cut corners and step on a few toes to get things done are applauded. We are constantly offered great wisdom reduced to six easy-to-read chapters, or self-improvement boiled down to a weekend course. It is difficult to live in these times and not assume that there is an easy answer to every need or problem if only you can find out who to pay or which link to click on.

So each year, this season of Lent is a sobering reminder that although giving in to such alluring alternatives comes naturally to us, the One who we have committed ourselves to following is one who had the foresight and courage to say 'no'; one who sees beyond the modest goods and short term gains and calls us to take the tough road of love and integrity that is willing to make sacrifices or endure hostility and abuse rather than compromise the quest for truth, justice and true godliness.

We deliberately tone down some of the more exultant aspects of our worship, to remind ourselves that even the joyous celebration of our life in God can become something that tempts us to hide from the costly decisions involved in following the one who went to the cross rather than sell us out. We put more emphasis on examining ourselves and confessing our sins, and tone down the celebration of our forgiveness, to remind ourselves that the wondrous news of God's mercy does not relieve us of the need to continue to recognise, understand, and struggle to overcome our own weaknesses.

The prominence of rites relating to the Catechumenate during Lent is related to these emphases. Historically, it was the Catechumenate that gave birth to the season of Lent. Many of the early churches preferred to celebrate baptisms at the Feast of the Resurrection, also known as Pascha or Easter, because of the strong baptismal symbolism of dying, being buried, and being raised to life with Christ. The catechumenate developed at that time as a way of preparing candidates for baptism by training and shaping them in the practices, beliefs and virtues of the faith, and the weeks immediately prior to the Feast of the Resurrection

thereby became the final and most intense period of the preparation of new believers for baptism.

Picking up on the biblical imagery of the forty years in the wilderness before God's people entered the promised land, and Jesus' forty days in the wilderness before embarking on his public ministry, this final intense period of disciplined formation and discernment came to be focussed over forty days.

A little more evolution of the practices, and the pattern emerged of the whole congregation returning to the Catechumenate each year for these forty rigorous days, to re-examine, renew and strengthen their own faith and discipleship, and to accompany the candidates in their final preparations for baptism. And that, as it became established as an annual practice for whole congregations, is the origins of the forty day season of Lent which leads up to and prepares us for the annual celebration of the passion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So on Wednesday night we witnessed four people mark the beginning of the final stage of their catechumenal journey into the membership of the church, and this evening we stand in solidarity with four more who are right at the start.

And so, as we focus on the journey towards baptism or baptismal renewal with these sisters and brothers, we even forego our usual celebratory reminder of our identity as a baptised people for the next few weeks. As they are challenging themselves with questions of whether they are willing to pay the price of embarking on this life with us, we are asking ourselves whether we have got what it takes to continue to live it and remain true to the vows we once made.

At the Paschal Vigil in the middle of next month, it will be a welcome joy to restore all these celebrations as we renew our baptismal vows and celebrate our immersion into the mysteries of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

But between now and then, if we would approach that celebration with integrity, we have six weeks that will challenge us to discipline our desire for shortcuts and quick fixes and commit ourselves anew to following Jesus on the hard yards that are unavoidable for those who will reach the goal of life in all its fullness. Six weeks to challenge ourselves, like the Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek, to peel off the caked-on mud from our surrounds and take a good hard look at ourselves and one another so that we might discover the good the bad and the ugly of who we are so that we can grow into the identity and the destiny for which we were created.