

08, Lent 1, Feb 10
Mt 4: 1- 11

LIVING OUT OF OUR BELOVEDNESS

Last summer I visited my brother in Gibraltar. A taxi driver kindly took us up the rock to see the Barbary Apes. And he gave us a little tourist's lecture on the way:

We learned that the Apes are a threatened species. We were told not to feed them- the authorities provide them with a balanced diet. We were told not to interact with them- human interaction affects their community dynamics. And we were reminded sternly that they are wild animals and we were not to get too close. They may LOOK cute, but they bite..

So, with these warnings ringing in our ears, we get out of the taxi. I'm taking a picture of some cute baby apes, when an adult ape comes over and proceeds to clamber up my leg onto my shoulder and head.

Now, does our valiant taxi driver rescue me and presumably the ape from imminent danger? Goodness no- HE takes out some food from his pocket (presumably kept there for this very purpose), and feeds the ape while he urges my brother to take pictures.

A relatively harmless little scene on its own, but multiplied a million times, it seems to capture the essence of what is wrong with the world.

If Barbary Apes didn't perform for the tourists and if the taxi drivers didn't get good pictures for the tourists then it would be bad for tourism, and for the taxi drivers' pockets.

So forget the bigger picture. Forget conservation and safety. Forget what is right and good. But do the thing that yields profit and popularity. Exploit the situation for gain. Close your heart to caring for life and care for material wealth instead.

Multiply it by millions of acts of self interest, millions of acts of seeking popularity and power, millions of acts where people choose the short term satisfaction over the larger good, and we are on a slippery slope that leads to destruction.

It's choices such as these that Satan presents Jesus with in today's scripture. – Should Jesus satisfy his immediate hunger or hold out for discovering God's larger purposes for him, which is why he's there?

Should he do something spectacular and risky that everyone would think was awesome? Or should he just trust that he is loved and not try to prove it? Should he go for power and prestige, exercise control, assert his own will? Or should he submit to God's will? be God's servant?

(Just a little aside here about using the name, "Satan": some of us may be uncomfortable with this personification, and we might like to simply think of those forces, inside us or outside of us, that together work to draw us away from God and God's purposes)

In the scripture these forces are personified, and in today's reading, Satan presents Jesus with choices. Jesus, of course, makes the good and right choice:

He chooses to be part of God's BIGGER picture, revealed in God's Word; he chooses to TRUST that he is loved; and he chooses to SERVE GOD alone. Unfortunately, this is not the choice that most of the world makes.

Someone brought to my attention recently a news article by Cameron Smith, where he quotes a study that claims that the world is in trouble because we base our economies on an expectation of exponential growth.

We just think we can go on and on growing forever. The authors say there is a limit to growth before we reach the point where we begin to self destruct.

What I found interesting, however, was their suggested SOLUTION to the problem. They say, "(We need) a revolutionary change, that sees people not as consumers and producers, but as citizens of invaluable worth in their own right".

" Invaluable worth in our own right" ! How totally extraordinary- does that not sound like religious language, spiritual language? "invaluable worth in our own right!" ?

It's precisely around this issue of worth that Jesus and Satan struggle in the wilderness. If we back up a few verses, we find that immediately preceding today's struggle, Jesus has been baptized.

As he comes up from the water, he hears a voice, God's voice, saying "This is my beloved son, I am delighted with him". Before he has DONE anything, before he has ACHIEVED anything- God affirms his infinite worth: this is "my beloved son".

It's these words, "beloved son" that ring in his ears as he enters the wilderness. Satan tries to separate those two words. Tries to pry the word "beloved" away from "God's Son".

Satan never uses the word "beloved". Because love is the binding force of the universe. It's love that binds us to God, to one another and to ourselves. And Satan wants to pry us away from any sense of belovedness.

To cut us off from God, to foster in us a sense of rejection and abandonment, to isolate us from others, to alienate us from our true selves. So Satan does not use the word “beloved”- it sticks in his craw.

Instead he finds a possible handle in the concept, “Son of God” because it suggests power—“So, he says, you’re the -Son of God- w0o o, power - full! Let’s SEE what you can do then! Do the IMPOSSIBLE- Stones into bread would be a CINCH for you!

But Jesus says” no”, all that he truly needs has already been provided in God’s Word. And so Satan tries again-. If Jesus could be persuaded to TEST OUT if he’s loved, he would already be separated from his belovedness.

“Throw yourself off this pinnacle”, Satan says, surely your loving father will catch you. But Jesus is not sucked in-. He has heard God’s voice calling him, “my beloved son”. He has no doubts. God’s Word is enough.

Then Satan takes off the gloves and simply says it straight- worship me, and I’ll give you power over all the kingdoms of this world. This is the core of it all: The word “worship” comes from the same root as “worth” – “worthship”.

The core of it all is where we attribute worth, and hence how we measure our worth. If Satan has his way in our lives, we will measure our worth by our stuff, the approval and love we get from people, and our power, prestige and wealth. And we will spend our lives striving for these.

But Jesus shows us another way- the way of our belovedness.

If we truly worship God, and follow in GOD’S way, we will know, like Jesus, that we are already beloved sons, beloved daughters of God. We will know that we do not have to DO anything to gain worth. And we will not expect GOD to do anything to PROVE our worth.

In the wilderness, Jesus shows us the way, and MAKES a way for us to discover our belovedness. He gives us a pattern to live by – to live out of our belovedness.

This last month I learnt to use the computer program, “ Publisher”. I had seen that people who use this program produce really professional looking publications. I wanted to do the same.

I discovered that Publisher offers templates, prepared by professionals,-people who know what they’re doing- these professional templates are made available to ordinary people like me, who don’t know what they’re doing.

We don't HAVE to use them, we can do our own design, but when we choose to use a template, it takes our work to a higher level. It looks good.

This is what Jesus provides us with: a template for living, designed by a "master" We don't HAVE to use what he offers, we can figure things out for ourselves and forge our own life.

But when we DO fit our living to the pattern that Jesus gives us, our lives take on a new and different quality, that is clearly discernible by others.

It is the difference between a life where we're striving for love and approval; and a life where we live out of love and approval. The difference between STRIVING to be beloved and KNOWING we are beloved.

What if we were to assume just for today, that we are truly and deeply beloved and we do not have to do anything to earn love and approval, because we already have that. How might this change what we DO today?" Or how we feel?

Might we be less anxious? Less driven? Might we DO less? Might we behave differently with our family? Might we be less defensive? Less critical? Might it affect what we buy? What we give away?

And how can we learn to live out of our belovedness? Rather than constantly striving to prove or gain approval? How do we actually pour ourselves into the template that Jesus gives us?

We have an opportunity before us during the 40 days of Lent. Lent is such an exciting time. Maybe it doesn't seem exciting to be depriving oneself of something, (groan, groan, 40 days without desserts, coffee, whatever!)

Practicing self discipline does seem a bit of a drag, but the exciting thing is that Lent offers a real possibility of working change in our lives, of allowing God to work change in our lives.

40 days is long enough to change a pattern of thinking, it's long enough to establish a new habit. And it's not so long that it's forever. It has an end.

We don't have to give up alcohol for the rest of our lives- just 40 days- or chocolate, or TV, or whatever it is we've set ourselves. Just 40 days.

Maybe we've decided to increase our church offering, or maybe to be kind to the person we hate, or maybe to eat only food that has traveled less than 300 miles- whatever we've set ourselves- we don't have to do it for the rest of our lives, just 40 days. It's doable.

And we can use whatever practice we've decided on to get in touch with our belovedness. Perhaps each time we say "no" to whatever, we can remind ourselves that in God's love we have all that we need. And we might say a prayer of thanks for all that we have.

If we've chosen to give more generously of our material things, let's do it with thanksgiving, and use this too as a reminder that we truly have enough. Our loving Father provides for all our needs.

In fact if we make thanksgiving a Lenten practice, we'll increase our sense of being loved by God.

If we've set ourselves something that we find difficult, it will be important to remember that when Jesus went into the wilderness, the Spirit went ahead of him, and never left him. And God's spirit goes with us too and does not leave us. Even if we fail.

If we stumble, it's not the end of our Lenten journey, - it's not a race that we get thrown out of or disqualified. We just pick ourselves up and resume what we have set ourselves to do. And we can use even this stumbling as a reminder that God loves us, whether or not we succeed.

And so for forty days we remind ourselves over and over and over that we are loved. And as we do so, we may want to go to scripture, to get to know the one who loves us. Henri Nouwen's little devotional book, "From Fear to love" is an excellent help too.

Lloyd spoke about the footprints that the children made for us for today.

As we come forward for communion we're invited to use these as a meditation, to think of these large footprints as Jesus footprints. As we place our small feet in Jesus' large one, we might consider the template that Jesus has provided, for us to pour ourselves into.

We might consider the way that Jesus has shown us: where we find our sufficiency in God, we trust God, and serve God alone.

We might meditate on this way that Jesus has provided for us- a way back to the Father's heart of love, back to our own belovedness.

Let us sing "You show us the way"