

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

Sunday 5th March, 2017 - Lent 1

GOSPEL READING Matthew 4: 1-11 *The Temptation of Jesus*

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

Leaders of churches across Australia met about six months ago and agreed that this day, the first Sunday of Lent, will be a day of Prayer and Fasting for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

Sometimes it is hard for us to hear about the problems of our world. Franklyn has been in touch with a number of men detained on Manus, and the despair and hopelessness there is growing. One of them recently wrote in an email: *Sorry if i am late to write for you. Sometimes even breathing is difficult for me in detention and eating food these days is suffering for me. My faith too weak to talk about it. I am very disappointed, in fact I don't like this life, even living in Australia doesn't change my mind. This miserable life is the problem. So in this situation how I can write for my friends to let them know about my feeling. I don't like to make you unhappy or sad by listening to my sad story. After passing about four years in detention i found and got a conclusion that i am not useful for this world. I don't want to complain to God about your politicians but on the contrary i ask him to help them to be useful for this world and guide them to do their best for the people of Australia. I try to write for you more and at the end I ask you to pray for me to have a peaceful life. Thanks for your godly messages and God bless the people of Australia.*

I'm sure the attitudes to Asylum Seekers vary widely in this gathering. And I'm sure some are tempted to say it is their own fault for trying to come to Australia. Our church has written a statement titled 'Shelter from the Storm' that outlines how we as people of faith might consider complex issues about Refugees and Asylum Seekers. It says: *As Christians called to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, challenge unjust systems and offer refuge and care to those who are marginalised and in exile.*

<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/uca-statements/item/1105-shelter-from-the-storm>

I've heard from Franklyn's friend on Manus now for a number of years, and there is a growing sense of despair. I struggle to journey alongside such suffering - there are only so many documentaries that I can bear to take in; I get fatigued hearing of riots or deaths in detention; I don't want to see children washed up on the shore as families flee carnage in Syria.

But no matter what fatigue we have, no matter the level of feeling helpless ourselves, the call of the gospel remains upon us - to keep loving our neighbour and welcoming the stranger.

And it seems this is one of the key tasks of this season of Lent. The season mimics the time of Jesus in the wilderness. He spends 40 days retreating from the usual comforts and trappings of the world to prepare for his ministry. Wilderness has a way of highlighting what is truly of value. Fasting has a way of focussing our attention towards daily needs.

Jesus is tempted to be untrue to himself and who he was called to be. There are always temptations that offer us an easier way than the path we tread. Knowing who we are and who we are called to be is an important task of this season.

Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the World, and the three temptations are short cuts that seem to good to be true. And that is the problem with temptation. When we want them to be true we fall easily for their lie.

It begins when Jesus is tempted to magically make bread out of stones. He is hungry and so is the world. What is wrong with a bit of bread to satisfy that hunger? Bread (or food) is the heart of hospitality. A hearty welcome involves a good feed. Food expresses love.

But food can get in the way of love and instead incite greed. What if Jesus uses this magic trick to feed himself and others. People would flock from miles away just to see this wonder. They would not care for

him or what he says, but simply want the trick or a feed. So Jesus resists this temptation.

The next one is spectacular - throw himself off the temple and be swept up by angels. Surely that kind of thing would draw a crowd and make them wonder about his powers. But we are all tempted to do things that will make others love us. But whatever accolades we get from being outrageous or spectacular or even stupid can never substitute for the real source of love, value and belonging – the Lord our God.

And the last temptation is a beauty. Imagine that all of this could be yours. All of this could be winning a world trip or house on the Gold Coast. Or it could be doing whatever it takes to gain the pleasure of your boss. It could be the intoxication of power. We want easy powers for ourselves, and so others will also be impressed. Perhaps Trump is a classic example of power and infamy that generates accolades, at least for a short time.

But all the kingdoms of the world cannot offer us love. 'Worship only the Lord your God and serve only him', says Jesus.

The 40 days in the wilderness have helped Jesus be clear about who he is and what is important. He is focussed on what is important. He will not be distracted from his call and who he serves, no matter how much better other things may seem. And that is what the season of Lent can be for you and me.

Do you know who you are and who you are called to be? Do you recognise the temptations when they strike? Can you discern the powers and the subtle things that can lure us when we are not strong?

Like the temptation to think of refugees as the problem of our government, or of other countries?

Like the temptation to think we that politics is not our business, even though systems are unjust. Or the temptation to say nothing because no one will really listen anyway. Or the temptation to switch off because we are a little tired this week, when those Jesus loves continue to need a neighbour and a welcome.

Just prior to this reflection we went through our usual pattern in the liturgy to recognise where we have strayed from the call of God upon us. We have also heard the words that through the grace of God we are forgiven.

Are we tempted to believe it ends there? It is easy to stay in that warm cosy place without heeding the deeper call to care for neighbour and welcome the stranger.

Lent is an invitation to journey in the wilderness with Jesus for our own 40 days of discovery of what is important and who we are called to be. It is a time of facing our own demons and temptations and then take up the cross and follow Jesus towards Jerusalem. It is a bare and bold invitation into life and love, despite all the easier options that tempt us.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness three times – to use his power to save his own life. Those same temptations invite us as disciples and the church to collude with the powers of the world.

So how will we discern those temptations when it comes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers?

Let us enter the spirit of this day of prayer and fasting – for Jesus' sake; for our own sake; and for the sake of our neighbours and those who are strangers. In the name of Christ. Amen.