

‘through one man: wilderness directions’

Reflection: Feb 26, 2023 Rev’d Ian Brown

Matthew 4: 1 – 11, Romans 5: 12 – 19

The gospel takes us into the familiar territory of human testing. It’s also familiar in terms of geography – the wilderness and being alone. I guess most of us have had the experience of being lost. Getting lost in a new city or a new area to us is bewildering. Knowing which way is up on a map, or having no map and no idea is worse. Not knowing where life is going and how to navigate it is common. Too many people feel totally lost.

Today it’s the preparation for Jesus ministry and the testing is mostly about discerning the right way. Finding direction in life is a big issue, so the process of discerning is important to look at. And in the background of this story, I have echoing in my mind the words of Paul,

“much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.”

So, we don’t engage in an abstract thinking about discernment, it’s not a reflection on a general theme, with an example or two that happen to be about Jesus because he is the subject of the readings. No, this is specifically about what has come to us, through one man. It’s about Jesus and what Jesus has done.

The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness. Beginnings are important, this one, and the direction it sets, is critical. The Spirit of God led Jesus out of comfort, out of control and normality and into a lonely, testing place.

In the Bible the wilderness is a place that’s associated with supernatural powers, with

demons and angels, a place where we encounter God and our deepest selves without masks or customs to hide behind. A lot of important things happen in the wilderness. Israel was tested in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the promised land. John, the baptizer appeared in the wilderness and now Jesus spends 40 days there, facing these tests. And now it begins for us the 40 day period of Lent.

In the desert Jesus faced and struggled with who he was. He faced and struggled with the nature of his mission and he struggled with the power of evil. One of the aspects I love most about this story is that Jesus grasps the challenge, confronts the testing, debates the scriptures, and makes discerning choices, even after 40 days of fasting. There is no avoiding, no ducking and weaving, no weasel words; he is fully engaged in the struggle.

Now think with me for a moment or two about what this means. What sort of struggle is it that Jesus has? Firstly it’s one that somehow has God’s purpose behind it; the Spirit leads Jesus into this experience. Secondly it’s not a black verses white battle; not your average Hollywood confrontation of hero and anti hero. “Why not use divine power to provide bread, why not show God’s power to rescue and save, why not rule the world’s kingdoms,” these are plausible questions put to Jesus. They are rational sensible questions, offering alternatives, not a blatant battle. And then this devil reads and knows his scriptures too and uses them subtly. He has a role like that of the Satan character; whose name means ‘the accuser’, in the book of Job. This is a literary role. Surely if this devil is the embodiment of evil and a serious opposition to God, Jesus would not be debating the finer points of biblical interpretation with him, as he would with a fellow rabbi.

But the issue being explored in this episode is what sort of God will Jesus serve and how will the serving be expressed?

“Come on Jesus, you’re hungry, you’ve got power, make these stones into bread. You can make yourself happy, even make all the hungry happy, come on Jesus satisfy yourself.” But the problem is, in putting this first, that pleasing our own whims doesn’t make a good master - in fact if we put that first, it’s our god and as a god, this sort of tail chasing makes a very poor deity.

Then, the next test was “oh, come on Jesus wouldn’t it be good to make it clear that God can rescue and save, just throw yourself down so the angels can be seen picking you up - what a witness that will be, what attention it will draw.” But testing God and self-aggrandizement also make for lousy gods that need more and more testing, more and more self-important gesturing.

And thirdly, “hey Jesus, what about using your great wisdom and power by ruling the whole world? You could be marvellous and do so much - if you just worship me.” But the means was so important Jesus, would not sacrifice his mission to a short cut, quick fix solution. The God Jesus called Abba, his daddy; God had to stay at the centre, God’s way of self-giving love had to stay as the means to that end.

Voices tempt us all the time - hey what about putting this at the centre, make money your goal, your god, go after good feelings, escape reality - or it could be sport or gambling or career or anything - all things, when put at the centre, when given control of us, will exact a price and what sort of god will they be? We know there are many lousy gods and only one true God.

So Jesus, who is to be the main character of the story unfolding, makes a clear set of

choices at the beginning of his ministry; he chooses to serve in a way that doesn’t focus on himself, his power or the outcome at any cost. For us then, following Jesus is about following these same sort of disciplines, because discipleship is about the way we make our life choices and the living of them. Is this a formula for success or wealth? No, but as Paul says,

“much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”

This reading is set for the beginning of Lent, the time when we remember the cost of the reconciliation Jesus brings to us and when we think of our own discipleship. Jesus was led out to the wilderness testing what was to be at the centre for him - which god would he worship? Which path would he take? What direction would he get from the wilderness testing?

So where do we turn to look for help when we aren’t sure which way to go? Yes, there’s GPS and maps on smart phones, but when life’s big questions confront us? We all have testing times. Jesus’ example of discernment is clear “we do not live by bread alone, but by every word the proceeds from the mouth of God”. Reflection on scripture, careful thought about consequences and long term meaning of direction, these are the example we see in the life of this one man, Jesus. May his grace be with us always. Amen.