Sermon

Lent I

18/2/18

Eltham

**Readings**

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

+FSHS

What is Lent for? What is Lent about?

Gospel reading: Mark tells the story briefly. Unlike Luke and Matthew there is no story of temptations and Jesus’ response to them. Instead, the three events are linked: baptism, being thrown out into the wilderness for 40 days and nights, and then coming back with a message to knock your socks off: Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.

That’s not a bad framework for us as we begin Lent. We have been baptized, joined with Jesus in his life, death, resurrection. We too must wrestle with our identity as God’s beloved children and join him in preaching the message of the realm of God. Lent is a time for us to draw near to God in a pared back, wilderness way. There’s wisdom in the prayer of the season:

Almighty and everliving God,

you hate nothing that you have made,

and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent:

create and make in us new and contrite hearts,

that we, worthily lamenting our sins,

and acknowledging our wretchedness,

may obtain of you, the God of all mercy,

perfect remission and forgiveness;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

This beautiful prayer suggests this season is about being penitent, repenting of our sins, looking for a change of heart (a new and contrite heart). It suggests that worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness may be a prayer for God’s mercy, remission and forgiveness. Let’s dig into that.

It’s not cool these days to talk about sin. I once commented to a mentor that we didn’t talk about sin much, and that it could do with more exploration, and she disagreed quite strongly at the thought. And I understand that reaction, because I was raised in a tradition in which being a wretched sinner was a starting point from which one never moved. And there are many dangers in making sin, rather than God’s grace, a starting point: because it leads to judgmentalism, perfectionism, and essentially living legalistically. Theology has moved a long way from the perspective that human beings are rotten to the core, wretched worms deserving to be stomped on by the Divine Foot, miserable offenders pawing at the feet of an indifferent God in the pouring rain. Our theological anthropology these days talks about humans made in the image and likeness of God, of the dawning of human consciousness and choice and its consequences, of a hopefulness that in becoming one with creation, God’s intention is to draw all created things into Godself and transform them – and we are invited to participate in that dance of giving and receiving and self-giving. Feminist theology talks more of original blessing than original sin, and reveals that what is often labeled as sin has been used to oppress women and other minority groups through the ages (particularly female sexuality). Liberation theology shifts the focus of sin from the personal to the corporate, the worst forms of sin being institutionalized oppression and injustice. For some theologians, sin is redefined as the failure to engage in mutually loving relationships in which God is made present. That lovely seasonal collect is, after all, a product of its time and place.

But it still holds a kernel of truth. In Lent we come face to face with the reality that we live surrounded by human brokenness in world that desperately needs God’s healing. In Lent, we come face to face with our own foibles, failures, and stuff-ups—the underbelly of the truth that we are God’s beloved children, called and sent forth with a message of hope for the world. If the world continues to be broken, then it’s incumbent on us to ask why, and what contribution we have made to not mending that brokenness, given that we are partners with God in this calling. The truth of the matter is that we are sinners—in the sense that none of us is perfectly good, none of us is immune from the odd dummy spit at others. We all live with some level of discord with ourselves, whether through not treating our bodies right, or through outright abuse, or through the kinds of thoughts we think. We all live in some level of discord with those around us: even at the best of times we are never completely in synch with the people around us, and we must face the fact that often our behavior contributes to the pain of other people—those closest to us, and those who live in the world with us. We’re all complicit in a society which endorses exploitation of people, animals, the environment. And even the greatest saints would say that as long as this mortal life endures not one of us is perfectly in tune with God, and actually there’s a lot of truth in that line from the hymn which talks about “our prayers so languid and our faith so dim”. Paul says it in Romans: All have fallen short of the glory of God, and if any of us claim otherwise then we’re a liar. And what that means is what Iranaeus said: The glory of God is a human being fully alive. Because to be in tune with ourselves, to love our neighbours, and to love God with all that we are IS to be fully alive.

Lent gives us the opportunity to seek forgiveness for these shortcomings—to forgive ourselves, to forgive others, and to seek forgiveness from them, and to ask God for forgiveness for our failings. Not out of a sense of “woe is me, miserable sinner-worm”. But because what we seek is our true selves: finding our rest in God. That’s what Lent’s about. It’s about the line in the collect “create and make in us new and contrite hearts”, hearts that are in tune and sing with God’s presence. If we seek forgiveness, and strive to offer forgiveness this Lent, it’s because to forgive, which is to release something to let go of a need for revenge or retribution, is to be free ourselves. Free to be God’s beloved children. Free to love wholeheartedly God and our neighbours as ourselves.

Forgiveness isn’t always easy. We live with the consequences and scars of the hurts others have inflicted on us. Sometimes it really is a case of seventy-times seven, as Jesus said to Peter. Sometimes forgiveness is a process which takes time. Sometimes it’s hardest to forgive ourselves. With forgiveness comes acceptance and freedom. For if we are free from the bonds of resentment which tie our hearts when we can’t forgive, then we also accept that the one(s) who hurt us are the way they are. There’s a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is not a free-for-all pass or get out of jail free card. It’s not like the one who caused the hurt is let off the hook. Forgiveness frees us. Reconciliation is the next step. If we have been the one hurting someone else, then when we seek their forgiveness the next question to ask is “how do we mend this?” or “what do I need to do to show contrition and my intention to change my behavior?” And that’s a step towards reconciliation. Forgiveness precedes reconciliation.

Lent is a wilderness time for us as God’s beloved children to pause and think about the dynamics of our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and to consider: where do I need to seek forgiveness and help to change, and where do I need to offer forgiveness. Forgiveness and grace is one of the hallmarks of the realm of God Jesus preached, and which we are called to live.

Prayer buddies: a copy of the prayer of the season with a prayer for the person beside us.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**