

The First Sunday in Lent  
Year A - 1/3/2020

Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-21

Matthew 4:1-11

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

The Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, “My principle anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between (light) and (darkness)... and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.” Although Kazantzakis never subscribed to any organised religion, there is no doubt in my mind that his writings were profoundly influenced by his Christian journey. And his words we hear today remind me that such a battle is the world of authentic religion...

It is also the most apt way I can think of to talk about what happens in today’s Gospel passage - this most familiar passage that we receive every year on the first Sunday of Lent - the temptation of Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth.... Although we know very little (from the Scriptures) about his adolescent and early adult years, we must imagine that he has known the whisper of God all his life. He has stepped away from the expected path... of work, marriage, family and home... to follow the path of a holy-man. As a disciple, he’s learned the spiritual disciplines - prayer, fasting, self-denial - and he is at home in the presence of God.

And then... around the age of 30, something happens... and he knows it’s time. Time to step-up. Time to take hold of his life with the ultimate seriousness of the divine voice that spoke to him at his baptism. ‘You are my beloved child...’ It’s time for him to speak... to act... to reveal all that the Spirit has taught him in these ‘hidden years’... time to lead his people back to God.

The opening line of today's gospel tells us the Spirit is surging through him. Now is his time! You can feel the urgency. But his first action??? It's not to go to Jerusalem to speak to the crowds. It's not to gather disciples and begin a movement. No... Jesus, impelled by the Spirit, goes out to the desert on extended retreat - '40' days - alone... silent... radical fasting... nothing but prayer.

He goes out to the wilderness to face the darkness that lives within his humanity... the darkness that lives in all of us. All of that dark stuff comes out for him in the experience of specific temptations...

- The need to be recognised... adored... loved.
- The desire to be listened-to... to be successful... achieve something worthwhile for Israel.
- The need to win... to be powerful... to be the saviour.

All of it encapsulated in the most terrible temptation of darkness - to use any means to achieve what he believes is right. The voice of temptation whispers seductively... 'You can have the power to do, to accomplish everything (and anything) you want. All you have to do is give yourself over to 'me'... to walk 'my' way.' Jesus goes out to the empty place, to wrestle with the darkness that lives within... as his first act.

Because he knows that this war must be fought... this must be faced... and this choice must be made... once and for all. This wrestle and this decision is the foundation for all that is to come after. It clears the path ahead... it weeds out the darkness that would otherwise choke and strangle his work.

His choice, regardless of what it costs him, is to be pure Light. He will be light for his people... for the world. Darkness has no hold on him... darkness has no foothold in his heart. This is Jesus, the one we came to know as Christ, wrestling with his humanity. This is our humanity on the page before us.

The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, "...there come times - perhaps this is one of them - when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die..." Lent is one of those times. (Well, that's the invitation anyway...)

This matters! This business of faith and church matters. You matter! What you do with your life matters. This journey of faith that we share at St Andrew's matters... and it deserves to be taken seriously. There is a cosmic struggle between darkness and light playing-out in us. Are we aware of it... or are we asleep?

And so, I invite you to come with me on a journey in these weeks of Lent... a journey that believes your life... your life of faith... matters. That something important is being played-out in you, in your own struggle between light and darkness. The invitation is to pause and consider where you are on your journey of faith... Are you growing and maturing... are you stuck... are you afraid and retreating backwards?

One of my disciplines this Lent is that I am reflecting on the writings and poetry of St. Teresa of Avila. Teresa was a 16th century Spanish contemplative... who left the church a legacy of great insight into the journey of prayer. She wrote extensively on the movement of our connection and disconnection with God.

She was a reformer in a corrupt church... bringing about a major return to the heart of Christian vocation... particularly in the Carmelite order. And although regarded by subsequent generations of the church... as a great 'one' - indeed she was the first woman proclaimed a 'Doctor of the Church' - her own path of faith and prayer was marked by struggle. It didn't come easily to her.

She knew darkness... the human struggle with darkness in its many disguises... and she was not afraid to talk about it... pragmatically and honestly. But most importantly, she would look at you and me, and tell us... that our lives mattered. In a society obsessed with social class, privilege and purity, she taught that God desired connection with everyone... regardless.

In a corrupt church obsessed with control, a church that taught that only the authority of the church and its sacraments could grant people access to God... Teresa taught that every person is given direct unfettered access to the Lord in prayer. The mature life of faith is available to each and every one of us.

She would look at you and me and say, 'What you do with your life matters... to the world and its future... and to God (who loves you). Your choice between darkness and light is a matter of great and eternal seriousness.'

On this first Sunday in Lent, when we hear the Gospel of Christ's temptation, there is a great temptation for us to be aware of also - the temptation to believe that we are essentially set in our ways - that it is unlikely we can really change ourselves much; that how we are now, for better or worse, is how we will always be. The Christian faith says this is simply not true - that our lives are open to the transforming love and grace of God at all times, whether or not we are aware of it; whether or not we believe it.

This Lent comes with an urgent invitation... "...there come times - perhaps this is one of them - when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die..."

In the name of God. Amen.