

**9<sup>th</sup> March, 2014**

**Reading: Matthew 4: 1 – 11**

**Sermon: How do we use our gifts?**

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent which is not a season about which we in the Church of Scotland get too excited. In other Christian denominations, Lent is important and is a time when people take time to reflect on their lives as we approach Easter.

In a way, it is what we do every week when we come to Church or at least that's the hope, that we take time to reflect on our own lives and ultimately on our relationship with God.

In our Gospel reading today we see Jesus in the midst of his wilderness experience. We read that **he was sent there by the Spirit** immediately after his baptism and we usually assume that he was sent to a place, to the desert wilderness, for a time of reflection and a time of preparation for his ministry which was about to begin. But that is not the only way of understanding that text.

There are some commentators who see this story as a parable. I've never really considered it in that way before but I can understand why it could be seen in that light. It is seen as a parable describing, not Jesus' physical location but his inner experiences.

Willie Barclay is one commentator who is happy to view this passage in both ways, as a parable and as a physical place. In one of his books, he says it doesn't need to be taken literally. He bases that opinion on one of the challenges or tests which the devil issues. It says the devil or the tempter took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth in all their splendour.

As Willie Barclay points out, there is no mountain high enough from which Jesus could see the whole world. It's not physically possible which suggests that we may be being asked to understand the text in a non-physical way.

It's not beyond the realms of possibility. How often have we heard people saying they are not in a good place? We have no doubt all said it ourselves. That is not about environment. It is always about some inner turmoil. It's always about how we are feeling inwardly.

It's not uncommon for us take the phrase 'wilderness experience' from the story of the temptations or from the story of the Israelites in the desert and to use that to refer to how we ourselves are feeling.

We may be feeling a bit lost, a bit isolated, cut off from the world around us by circumstances, often outwith our control. When we talk about having a

wilderness experience, or when we feel the above emotions, we are very definitely referring to our mental state, to our inner experiences and not our physical environment.

In the light of that, Matthew may well have used this story, this parable, to describe to us how Jesus himself felt as he was about to begin his ministry. It's like he was facing a dark night of the soul. It's the same thing as a wilderness experience.

Starting a new ministry is quite daunting. Starting my ministry in Drumchapel was very exciting. It was my first charge but then I very quickly realised the responsibility that had been placed on me and for a time it was quite overwhelming.

Jesus was about to start his ministry and it would seem from this story that he too found that quite daunting. He went from a real high at the time of his baptism knowing that he had God's approval to a real low, a real low in the wilderness. How was he going to get his message across? A challenge which faces all of us as ministers.

We are told that after forty days and nights, Jesus was hungry and tired and so the tempter focussed on food, on what would satisfy Jesus physically, and today we are only going to look at that first temptation. **Turn the stones into bread.** Use your powers for your own ends, the tempter suggested. As Willie Barclay says, everyone has been given a gift and everyone has two options. We can either use the gift which God has given us for our own ends or we can use it to help others in our service of God.

What gift have we been given by God and what do we do with it? Willie Barclay gives an example. He says that some people have been gifted with a voice which is good to hear. With that voice they can do two things. They can cash in on it, and there is nothing wrong with earning a living by using our gifts, but what is wrong is when we only use our gifts for monetary gain as opposed to using them to help others in God's service.

The same can be said of other gifts from God. Some are good with their hands, the knitters, the sewers, the crafters.

Some are gifted in music and could use that gift for their own ends or in their service of God. Some are good in the kitchen, cooking, baking, making tea.

Some have got gardening skills or joinery skills or plumbing skills or decorating skills and in the past, many of the husbands used those skills in God's service without payment and yet people also need to make a living.

Some can drive and have time on their hands, time which could be used to help others either by visiting them or by taking them places.

Every one of us has a gift which can be used for our own ends, for selfish ends only, but a gift which can also be used to further God's kingdom, to serve others and to serve God. What are we tempted to do? Think of your gifts. What do you do with them? What do I do with mine?

Jesus was challenged to turn stones into bread. The challenge was not just about his physical hunger but about his ministry. One sure way to get people to follow him was to give them material things.

As Willie Barclay says: Surely history justified that approach. Had God not fed the Israelites manna in the desert? Had God not said, I will rain bread from heaven for you. Was there not a great banquet planned in heaven?

Jesus could have found all sorts of justification for using his gift to turn stones into bread but then people would only have followed him for what they could get out of him. The material would have been a bribe. In actual fact, Jesus wasn't offering material things. On offer was the cross. He called people, he calls us, to a life of giving, not of getting. He calls us to a life of service.

The implication in this test is not that we shouldn't give materially to anyone but there is a danger implied. There is a danger that we only treat the symptoms and not the cause and we are guilty of that. MOMA, for example, which as a Session we were instrumental in setting up, it provides starter packs to the homeless and food parcels to the hungry helping to relieve some of the symptoms of poverty and what MOMA does is worthwhile but should not be an end in itself.

What do we do about the causes of homelessness, about the causes of poverty, about the causes of hunger, about the social injustices which are prevalent in our society? At some point we need to look at the disease and not just the symptoms and that is all part of our life of service.

Looking at the disease means looking at ourselves, at our own hearts. All of the causes of injustice are rooted in the hearts of men and women. Change comes about when we change and so Jesus' message to the tempter is quite poignant. Satisfying physical hunger is not enough. There is a hunger which cannot be satisfied by bread alone and that is also God's message to us: **Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.**

If we truly want to help people, we have to learn to be dependent on God. We have to learn to build our lives on his Word and we have to be able to take that message to others. Only then will their hunger be satisfied. Only then will their deepest needs be met.

Only when our hearts are satisfied, will we be able to step out of the wilderness and minister to others as Jesus did after forty days and nights.