

An Offering Acceptable to the Lord

Lent 1

Sunday 21st February, 2010

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. (Deuteronomy 26: 1-2)

These instructions from Moses to the people of Israel come in the midst of many instructions about how to live a holy, righteous life in community with each other and in honour and reverence for God who has delivered them from slavery and oppression. For the people of Israel, the offering of the first fruits was to be a humble acknowledgement of God's faithfulness and abundant grace, a declaration of deep gratitude for what God has done for them, and their ongoing, life-giving relationship with God.

It is a powerful and a colourful image for us to meditate upon in our daily lives as God's people here in this time and place. Although some of us have our own vege gardens, in an urban, industrialised culture such as ours, where not many have the responsibility of growing our own food to feed our families, the idea of a first fruits offering could be a little antiquated - but only if we take the image at face value, on a superficial level. The offering to God of the first fruits of our labour and our lives goes much deeper than pumpkin and figs, it is about giving to God what we value and treasure most, with humility, thanksgiving and the joy of being in relationship with God who loves us.

Our offering basket may not overflow with fruits and vegetables, but it should contain our hopes and dreams, our gifts and talents, our strength and achievements, our work and service, our relationships, the choices

we make on a daily basis, our wealth and possessions, and at the heart of the basket should be our very selves – with all of our pain, darkness, brokenness and human frailty. Only then will our offering be beautiful, fragrant and acceptable to God.

So often the temptation is to fill our baskets with the things we don't really value or the extras that are surplus to need. Sometimes our baskets are filled with partial offerings – we may happily place in there our commitment to help with a particular ministry, but leave out the relationship in which we need to swallow our pride. Sometimes we place generous amounts of money in the basket but leave out disciplined time studying the Scriptures and praying. We all need to prayerfully and honestly examine the offerings we are making to God in response to his saving, life-giving love for us.

Our gospel reading today, taken from Luke 4: 1-15 may help us in our reflections about the quality of our first fruits offering to God.

Just before his public ministry begins, Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. The wilderness is a dry, arid and harsh place to be. It is not a land flowing with milk and honey, but a place of hunger, and thirst, exposure to the elements, frustration and loneliness. The motif of wilderness or desert places is a common thread through the biblical narrative. It is both a real, physical place that many of God's people find themselves wandering in, and a powerful spiritual image used in the psalms and wisdom writings.

Even for those who are well prepared the wilderness is a place of hardship, challenge and testing. It can be a place of discomfit, unfamiliarity and insecurity.

Some mystics and spiritual writers speak of the wilderness as place where we experience the loss of self¹. Whilst I can understand what they mean by this, I would say, that rather than a *loss* of self, the wilderness provides us with an opportunity to discover *our true* selves.

¹ For example, Cowan, James Journey to the Inner Mountain: In the desert with St Antony. Hodder and Stoughton 2002, p26

Jesus, in the wilderness, experienced a stripping away of the external things we humans so often use to define ourselves –social position and community ties, our job, our lifestyle, our achievements and our possessions. He also experienced the stripping away of all the things we take for granted – an abundance of food and water to hand, access to medical facilities, friendships and family relationships, a safe and secure home.

If Jesus relied on these things to give him a sense of identity, then it would be easy to understand how he might experience a loss of self in such a place. And yet, as Luke illustrates, the wilderness is not a place in which Jesus experienced a loss of the self, but one in which he experienced a *redefining* of the self.

In the *Seasons of the Spirit* material we use in our worship preparation, there is a short article by William Mangrum who is a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. In speaking of Jesus' experience in the wilderness being tempted, or tested by Satan, Mangrum writes: "We are conditioned for the work of God through struggle. And, that strangest of all companions – the devil- is part of our conditioning. To be ready for the work ahead, Jesus needed to know three things. Jesus had to know from whence he came. Jesus had to know of the food that would sustain him. And, Jesus had to know his purpose"².

In this wonderful insight into Jesus' formation and preparation for ministry and the depth and strength of his relationship with God, we see Jesus struggling with himself and his own personal desires, with the pressures to conform to what others wanted him to be, and with the deadly lure of power and success.

For each of us, the particular struggles and temptations we face in the wilderness may differ. Some of us may struggle as Jesus did with the false promises of power and popularity, others may struggle with the desire to withdraw from responsibility and conflict, others may struggle with the need to feel special or the compulsive attachment to material things. In the midst of our own wilderness times, it may be helpful for us

² Mangrum, W. M. *Strange Companions in Seasons of the Spirit* Congregational Life Lent-Easter 2010. Mediacom. P37

to ask ourselves: from whence do I come, what nourishes and sustains me, and what is my purpose?

If we look into Jesus' metaphorical offering basket in the midst of his testing and struggle, we might expect to see it fairly empty, as our baskets often are in times of hardship and struggle. And yet, what we see is a basket overflowing with the very heart of Christ himself. Throughout his wilderness ordeal, at a time when he is most vulnerable and physically and emotionally weak, Jesus is still able to give God the first fruits of his life, and in so doing, defines himself and his purpose in terms of God's love rather than in terms of the world.

In the words of Psalm 91 this morning, we prayed: *Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide under the shadow of the Almighty, they will say to the Lord "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I trust". (vs1-2)*

If we want to use this Lenten season fruitfully to redefine who we are in God's love and God's purposes, then we would do well to begin with meditating upon this heartfelt declaration; and having done that, to prayerfully examine what we are offering to God in response.

The wilderness or desert is a dry and arid place, a place of testing and hardship, but as anyone who has spent any time in the physical desert will tell you, it is also a place of extraordinary beauty and life. And so it is with the spiritual desert landscape. It is a place of struggle, detachment and stripping away, which can be painful, but it can also be a place of clarity, of *apatheia* - holy stillness³, of great blessing and life.

Calling us, leading us, guiding us, God gathers us in compassion and grace. This Sacred Presence is our map, this Sacred Presence is our way, this Sacred Presence is our destination⁴.

The Lord be with you.

³ Cowan, James Journey to the Inner Mountain: In the desert with St Antony. Hodder and Stoughton 2002, pxi of the Introduction.

⁴ Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Lent-Easter 2010, Words of Assurance, p34