

13 March 2011

Matthew 4, 1-11

Starting a Journey – Who are you really?

In the church calendar today is set as the First Sunday in Lent. In Munich we have witnessed the tradition of Fashing during the week. A time of carnival where people appear to party and drink to excess before the period of Lent begins. This party spirit is reflected in other cultures, in Venice, where they celebrate the world famous Carnival, in North America where they celebrate Mardi Gras and in South America where the Brazilian Carnival is one of the best known celebrations. Back in the UK we also celebrate the beginning of Lent, but in a much more reserved way. We eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, the evening before Ash Wednesday. In the carnival tradition, the aim is to party and enjoy ourselves before we enter the more reflective time of Lent. In the UK the idea is to eat the last of the sweet food, before the discipline and fasting within lent begins.

But what is this really all about? What is Lent and why do our cultures have these differing traditions before the start?

Within the Christian Church, Lent is traditionally the 40 days that lead up to Easter and has been used by the churches as a period of preparation. The preparation during this period takes many forms, but is predominantly a period of reflection and disciplined study.

Some churches set very strict rules to Lent and certain foods and activities are not allowed. In other churches, it is seen as a time of reflection. In some churches there is little teaching and in some Lent was abandoned at the time of the Reformation, as it was seen as too Roman Catholic.

The tradition of 40 days comes from the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, the story we read this morning. If Jesus spent 40 days in the desert preparing himself for his journey, his future ministry, then we should use 40 days to prepare ourselves for our journey in preparation for Easter and the Good News.

The reading we shared this morning is set in Matthew's gospel following Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The baptism of Christ marked the start of the new period of Jesus' life and the time in the desert was the final preparation before he started his journey of ministry. Matthew explains that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and during that time of preparation was subjected to several temptations by the tempter.

The temptations of Jesus in many ways reflect the temptations that we often experience. To make it worse, we are rarely tempted just the once, temptations often come back to haunt us. If we consider the temptations experienced in the reading, we recognise issues we face concerning our own identity, our trust in God and our desire for power or position.

First, we hear the tempter say, 'If you are the Son of God' Jesus had to face up to the question of **who he really was**. This is a question we often ask ourselves. A recent radio programme explored the pictures used on the social networking site Facebook profiles. For those without computers, Facebook is a very popular website where people can keep in touch by placing information, photographs and news onto their space and allowing others to view it. Girls seem to pose for their photographs, whilst boys use any photo available. They seem less concerned about what their photograph says about them.

What would we use to portray ourselves? Do we rely on clothing labels or the type of house we live in to say who we are? Do we rely on where we come from, what language we speak and how wealthy we are? Do we rely on how we behave and how we treat other people? And what about our church community; how do we reflect our identity to the community we serve? What are the outward signs that we show other people? Do our communities actually recognise the outward signs and do they interpret them correctly? Do others know who we really are?

Jesus told the Tempter that he did know who he really was and that he also knew who God was. We need to be able to show people who we really are and demonstrate our faith through our lives.

In the second temptation, the Tempter repeats the question, 'If you are the Son of God – throw yourself down' asking Jesus if he believes himself to be the Son of God, and if he is, then the angels would save him from falling to the ground from the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus succeeds in refuting the temptation. Jesus was not prepared to use the power of God for his own purposes. We also have to be careful how we ask for God's help and direction. How we act and interpret situations is often very different from the way those who have not met Christ act or interpret.

We often categorise people by their job, language, accent, education and appearance. All or some of them influence the way we approach people. As Christians we should be wary of such judgements. The Tempter expected Jesus to act as he himself would act, given the situation. However, Jesus acted as the Son of God; as himself. He did not have to fit into the behaviour of the Tempter. We should receive people as brothers and sisters in the same open manner, without giving any regard to human labels, rather by looking behind the labels the person displays and seeing the true person.

In the third temptation, Jesus is offered great power and wealth if he will turn away from God. We have all been tempted by power – even as children in the playground or crèche, we often would like to be top dog.

I am not sure if any of you have read the book or seen the film called 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' by Stieg Larsson. In the story the hero, Lisbeth, defined her own morals. They are totally logical but subjective and refer to her own beliefs and standards of behaviour. She is passionately loyal to those whom she loves yet she feels freely entitled to attack anyone she identifies as a threat. This appears a very logical method of selecting a moral code, but is based on self rather than any external moral code or belief.

Jesus showed how he was not interested in personal power, and as we go through Lent and approach Easter we will see how Jesus certainly avoided power but accepted his responsibilities – sometimes reluctantly as he knew the cost of these responsibilities.

We likewise need to recognise that following Christ is not seeking power or position. It is accepting the responsibility of being a servant of Christ. Of following his example and listening to the direction of the Holy Spirit so that we can affect other people's lives, no matter what outer image they try to display. We must live our lives by the direction given by Christ and not through our own rules.

These three Temptations of Christ demonstrate the key values that the Tempter tried to test on Christ. Looking at the readings in Matthew, we are often given a comfortable understanding, as the image we are given is of Christ and his confident reaction, but how

in every day life do we determine our values confidently responding to the Temptations?

I believe that our values are often absorbed from our society, our upbringing and those around us. In addition, at times, we also specifically choose values that might suit us at the time. There is a quote from Groucho Marx, one of the famous Marx brothers who starred in the early black and white comedies. 'Those are my principles and if you don't like them, well, I have plenty more' We also need to re-evaluate our values on a regular basis, but, unlike Groucho, we need to ask, not that they suit those around us, but rather do they really reflect the Kingdom of God? Do they reflect the example that Christ has left us? Do they reflect the relationship we are developing with Christ through the Spirit? I would suggest that this is not only a question for individuals, but for church communities as well.

Identity is a key element to growth in life and faith. Believing ourselves to be loved by God is the foundation upon which we build our Christian lives. It helps us to understand that we are an individual in the mind of God and not just one of many. It helps us to realise that we are an individual within the church and community and that we have our own individual part to play, our own individual responsibility. So, how do we go about changing those issues that are constantly undermining our faith and our witness?

The tradition of the church during Lent, based on Jesus' experience in the wilderness, is to tackle these issues head on during the next 40 days. For many centuries Christians have set time apart over this period to reflect on their personal reaction to the key questions that Jesus faced, as well as many others. But I could suggest if we start with the three temptations of Jesus, we will all make a good start.

What is our Identity?

Do I really Trust God?

Do I have a desire for power or position? – how do I handle it?

Christians over the years have used several tools or mechanisms during Lent to help them. In many ways it is like going into our own desert.

The church has been practicing Lent for many centuries now, a time of preparation before Easter. Before Jesus started his journey of ministry, he went into the desert and fasted for 40 days and prepared himself for what lay ahead. When he did so, he was tempted to question his identity, he was tempted to question his trust in God and he was tested on his desire for power and position. In short, he was tested to see who he really was. Let us all use this period of Lent to understand who we really are; to identify our true person and ensure that we understand our identity and that it truly reflects our Christian values. To ensure that we really trust God, and don't just follow blindly, but have an honest relationship with

him. To see that we understand that the position we are given by God is that of a Servant, to serve those around us.

Who am I?

Lord, this week,

may you and I walk so closely,

that I know who I am in the light of your love

and your life;

Help me to give that life and that love

to all those whom I meet on the way.

Amen.