

LENTEN

STUDIES, 2008.

These studies are based on

Lent and Easter Readings from Iona,

-Neil Paynter (ed)

Prayer: O Christ, you are our enlightener.

**Once and for all, you
broke the link between suffering and
punishment,
erased the line between deserving and
undeserving,
and invited the unseeing to open their
eyes to the truth about themselves.**

**Doing this, you revealed yourself,
became vulnerable.**

**Preserve us from defensiveness
that makes us vicious.**

**Give us insight to see the structures of
injustice by which we profit,
and grace to cherish all people in our
vulnerability, knowing that we all live
within your love.**

- Kathy Galloway.

(Groups may choose to pray this prayer at every study)

First Week of Lent.

Temptation and vulnerability.

Matt 4.1-11

Mk 1.12-13

Lk 4.1-13

**All three of the Synoptic Gospels record the experience of Jesus's
temptation in the wilderness.**

**All three record that Jesus was led into this experience by the
Spirit.**

**All three name the tempter as the devil, and suggest a prolonged
stay in the wilderness – forty days.**

These common details raise questions for us:

**(i) Jesus was led into the situation of temptation by the Spirit, so
why do we pray, “Lead us not into temptation”? Could the
petition in the Lord's Prayer mean something else?**

**(ii) Does your experience embody times when you felt God led
you into a time of temptation? Can you share the experience?**

**The stated, but indeterminate, time of forty days has led
some to regard the wilderness experience as a time of ‘retreat’.
Spiritual retreats are common today and the word ‘retreat’ often
conjures up a picture of an escape from busyness and stress of
everyday life into a kind of pious otherness where time is spent
talking with God and communing with nature.**

Question: In what ways does the nature of Jesus's wilderness experience challenge us to revisit our understanding of 'retreat'?

Let's look closely at the texts.

Matthew and Luke, with a slight variation in the order of the temptations, offer profound thought. Other situations in the Gospels show us that Jesus knew the need to go apart regularly to pray, to be alone with God. Here the leading into the wilderness included specific temptations.

Question: Are there positive depths to be explored within temptations?

Matt 4.2, and Lk 4.2 set the first temptation in the context of vulnerability. Jesus was hungry for he had fasted for a considerable period. The implication of the wiliness of the tempter is noteworthy for isn't it a fact that temptation always springs from vulnerability? Into moments of vulnerability comes 'doubt' which is tempting in itself.

Note the Gospels begin the temptations with the words, "If you are the Son of God..." then relieve your own distress. Turn stones into bread.

Question: What is the particular nature of this temptation?
Is it an issue of being free of human limitation?

Matt 4.8ff and Lk 4.5ff pose the second temptation in the form of a bribe. Here the devil promises great power to Jesus on an assumption. Is there a double edge to this temptation?

Question: Is the devil trying to 'use' Jesus in an endeavour to prove himself greater than God?

The third temptation is significantly centred in the very heart of the nation of Israel. The temptation is enacted on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. Note that Jesus is invited to throw himself down- to physically endanger himself, to prove God would rescue him. This temptation shows the devil attempting to manipulate both God and Jesus's trust in God. Very subtle!

Let's gather the three responses of Jesus to the temptations.

- 1) "*It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'*"
- 2) "*It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'*"
- 3) "*It is said, 'Do not put the Lord, your God to the test.'*"

Question:

Are there perspectives to be found in these replies of Jesus that offer us stability in our everyday temptations?

Hymn:

All my hope on God is founded; all my trust he will renew,
through all change and chance he guides me,
only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

God's great goodness lasts for ever, deep his wisdom, passing
thought: splendour, light and life attend him,
beauty springing out of naught. Evermore from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

-Robert Bridges.

4.

Second Week of Lent

Hymn:

Help us to accept each other as Christ accepted us;
Teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe
We are *ourselves* accepted and meant to love and live.

Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people, for all-not just for some,
To love them as we find them or as they may become.

Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
In living situations to do the truth in love;
To practice your acceptance until we know by heart
The table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.

Lord, for today's encounters with all who are in need,
Who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread,
We need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on:
Renew us with your Spirit; Lord, free us, make us one!
-Frederik Herman Kaan.

Identity and Knowing. *Mark 8.27-28*
 Matt 16.13-17

The story of Caesarea Philippi is very familiar. The question of Jesus concerning people's discernment of him brings a number of responses. These answers raise the question: *What are the criteria by which we value others?* (Share ideas)

"Some say, John the Baptist..."

What is implied? –an evangelist, a new voice, moralist,
baptizer, fearless, dedicated...
(add other attributes)

"Some say, Elijah..."

What is implied? – a complex character, prophet,
confrontational, fearless & fearful,
miracle worker,...
(add other attributes.
Stories of Elijah are found in 1Kings 17 ff.)

Jewish tradition gives a special place to Elijah. The cup of Elijah is present at the Passover meal, and his physical return is expected to precede the coming of the Messiah.

"Some say, Jeremiah or one of the prophets..."

What is implied? - man of God, a reformer, a critic of the
ruling class...(You may wish to choose a
well-known prophet to discover characteristics common to the prophet and to Jesus. Share thoughts.)

Do we now ‘know’ the person of Jesus from these comparisons?

Jesus didn’t think so!

Story: (extract from Brian Woodcock)

As we sat talking at her bedside, I watched the two nurses who were attending to an elderly woman opposite. “Come along, Alice. Sit up and eat your meal. We’ll take you to the bathroom when you’ve finished.”

I marvelled at these angels of mercy. They knew everyone on the ward by name. They understood the needs of their patients better than most of them did themselves.

But my friend sadly shook her head. “No-one would have called her Alice before she came here,” she said to me under her breath. “She was always Mrs Williams – the most respected head teacher the town has ever had.”

Question: Is it true that we tend to use the word ‘know’ superficially when speaking of people we have just met or heard discussed? Do we do them a disservice?

Jesus pressed his disciples for more. “*But who do you think I am?*” Jesus asks for insights arising from the disciples’ personal experience of him. Jesus did not discount earlier answers, but implies they are insufficient, not full enough. Always what another has taught us, shared with us is only partial knowledge.

“Yet Mrs A Williams –was she not special too?

*Was anyone else quite like her,
with exactly her gifts and commitment,
and her volumes of mystery stories
published secretly under a fictional name?*

*Was Mrs A Williams not unique -
daughter of God in her own right”*

Question: How important is it that we seek to know the uniqueness of other people whom we meet in church and supermarket?

In answer to Jesus’s penetrating question, Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God “

Question: (i) Alert as we are, to the variations of messianic expectations of those times, what do we hear in Peter’s response?.

(ii) Can we say we know the uniqueness of Jesus by acclaiming him ‘Messiah’?

(iii) Have we locked the identity of Jesus into a Jewish concept of ‘Messiah’? Where does experience enter into our understanding? If Peter’s reply is all we need to know Jesus, what is the Spirit to lead us into? –John 16.12

‘Knowing’ is a journey. There is always more to a person’s identity awaiting discovery. Could you fully present the identity of the person sitting next to you?

Prayer: Teach me, O Christ.

Teach me to recognise the dignity, the uniqueness, the divine possibility of every living person.

Teach me to take no one for granted, no friend or stranger, no crowd or category, no statistic or stereotype.

Let me never overlook the hidden ones who yearn for recognition, and secretly ask, “Who am I?”

And in that recognition, in that deepest knowing let me encounter you.

- Brian Woodcock.

Affirmation of Faith:

We believe that God is present
 in the darkness before dawn:
 in the waiting and uncertainty
 where fear and courage join hands,
 conflict and caring link arms,
 and the sun rises over barbed wire.
 We believe in a with-us God
 who sits down in our midst
 to share our humanity.
 We affirm a faith
 that takes us beyond the safe place:
 into action, into vulnerability
 and into the streets.
 We commit ourselves to work for change
 and put ourselves on the line;
 to bear responsibility, take risks,
 live powerfully and face humiliation;
 to stand with those on the edge;
 to choose life
 and be used by the Spirit
 for God's new community of hope.
 Amen

Third Week of Lent

Transfiguration: *Matt 17.1-8*
 Mk 9.2-8
 Lk 9.28-36

Work in groups of three and read the three Gospel passages noting a) common features and b) differences. Share insights.

Transfiguration defies detailed description:

Matt – And he was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun.

Mark- ...and he was transfigured before them

Luke - ...and the appearance of his countenance was altered

Common to the three descriptions is the stated fact of Jesus's dazzling white garments.

This experience was in an isolated place on a high mountain. Some commentators locate the mountain as Mt Tabor, whilst others favour Mt Hermon as it is closer to Caesarea Philippi. Whatever the exact nature of the transfiguration, Jesus remained recognizable. Perhaps more puzzling is that this experience was limited to three of the disciples. Puzzling too is the instant identification of the two extra figures as *Moses* and *Elijah*.
Question (i) What spiritual associations come to mind in the linking of Moses, Elijah and Jesus?

(ii) Should we interpret the transfiguration literally, or could it be a myth conveying far-reaching truth?

Let's look again at the passages:

Peter appears to intrude upon the conversation of Jesus, Moses and Elijah. He says, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish I will make three booths –one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

What interpretation do we place on Peter's words, 'it is well that we are here'? Compare Mark's description of Peter as *out of his depth and afraid, yet appreciative*. The building of temporary shelters suggests that Peter hoped the visitors would stay a while; but suddenly they were overshadowed by a cloud and a voice from the cloud declared, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him."

Do we hear in the voice of God the repetition of the affirmation made at the baptism of Jesus? (Mk 1.11, Matt 3.17, Lk 3.22)?

Less than a week earlier Peter had declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. What do you think was the effect of this confirmation? Was there a new, deeper call to ministry for Peter, James and John? Were they being called to 'listen' more perceptively, given the years of travelling with Jesus?

Were the disciples being offered further meaningfulness through the transfiguration - *the linking of exodus and Passover*
 - *the linking of law and prophecy*
 - *the recognition of the prevailing presence of God through the ages manifest in the person and ministry of Jesus?*

Mystery and awe emanate from the transfiguration of Jesus and overwhelm us, as do times when we know the imminent presence of God in the everyday.

Transfiguration is a revelation, an epiphany, an experience that leads us forward in strengthened confidence.

Share some of the special times of the awareness of God in your lives.

Hymn:

God gives us a future,
 daring us to go
 into dreams and dangers
 on a path unknown.
 We will face tomorrow
 in the Spirit's power,
 we will let God change us,
 for new life starts now...

Holy Spirit, teach us
 how to read the signs,
 how to meet the challenge
 of our troubled times.
 Love us into action,
 stir us into prayer,
 till we choose God's life, and
 find our future there.

-Elizabeth J Smith.

Fourth Week of Lent.

Prayer:

Christ, how we defend and conserve
what is obscure and obsolete!
We evade the point, afraid to ask,
afraid to be seen not to know,
even when your way ahead is clear
but offends common sense.
You can't really mean that anyway!
-So we say.

Christ, don't be too patient with us.
But take us firmly on one side.
Teach us your open secret
To welcome you
in the child, in the vulnerable,
whom the world judges of no importance.
Teach us a greatness
-out with pride and respectability –
to turn our world and ourselves upside down.

And as we see greatness in each one,
in your love and affirmation
so may we celebrate! Amen.

-David Coleman and Zam Walker Coleman.

Greatness and Humility. *Mark 9.30-37*
Matt 17.22-23; 18.1-5
Luke 9.43b-48

Recently New Zealand has been celebrating the great exploits and social concerns of Sir Ed Hilary. Truly a great man, but the media claim that he was the greatest New Zealander adds a different, and a debatable, issue. As soon as the superlative is used of a person there is the note of competitiveness, even personal acquisitiveness.

Read the three Gospel passages:
Mark alone tells us that Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Galilee inconspicuously. He suggests this was a special time for the disciples – a form of retreat. An aloneness together in the presence of God,

In her book, *The Heart of Darfur*, Lisa French Blacker presents the dilemma of the human need of helpers to find space for themselves amidst the pressing needs of the people of Darfur. She speaks of the reality that no matter how much is done, there is always more to do. This pressure is known to us too.

Question: Is the 'drive' to be 'givers' rather than 'receivers' another expression of 'greatness'?

The three Gospels preface the debate about greatness with Jesus' teaching of his imminent death and resurrection.
Note the recorded reactions of the disciples.

2.

Matt 17.23 –*they were greatly distressed*

Mark 9.32- *did not understand and they were afraid to ask him.*

Luke 9.45 –*it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it.*

Question: Do the emotions that the disciples experienced resonate with situations of grief that we know?

Do you think the specific teaching of Jesus prompted the issue of future leadership?

Note the three Gospels give different contexts to the question of greatness.

Mark has Jesus seeking the cause of the uneasy atmosphere among the disciples, and the reaction of the disciples is silent shame.

Matthew brings the issue of greatness into the open as the disciples sought an answer from Jesus. Note too the different dimension of the question: *Who is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?*

Luke like Mark addresses the issue of ‘greatness’ as competitiveness amongst the disciples. Luke speaks of argument; and records Jesus immediate action to dispel the corrosive element.

Enter the image of a child as a teaching about ‘greatness’ and ministry. *Compare Matt 20.26-7; Mark 9.35; and Luke 9.48.*

3.

In putting a child in the midst of the arguing disciples, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God.

Question: What do you think are the attributes of children that offer insights of servant ministry to disciples?

Hymn:

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you:
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I’ll laugh with you:
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we’ve seen this journey through

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we’ve known together
of Christ’s love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too. –Richard Gillard.

Hymn:

Faith has set us on a journey
 past the landmarks that we know,
 taking risks with no insurance
 but the Word that tells us “Go!”
 Friend or job or home or lover
 we may need to leave behind,
 outworn truths and ways of thinking,
 baggage to the past consigned.

Some are swags of easy conscience
 who with others hitch a ride,
 some are tourist-package Christians,
 dollar-safe with Book and guide.

There are others on this journey –
 those who long and pray and search,
 heave the stones to free the structures,
 love the Christ and leave the Church.

We are this unlikely people
 in the Body knit as one,
 company of clowns and cripples –
 some are wise and some can run.

Prophets are our travel agents,
 Gospel makers lay this road:
 to the place of peace and promise
 faith will take us into God.

-Shirley Murray.

Studies prepared for Otaki-Waikanae Presbyterian Parish
 by Nan Burgess.

Fifth Week of Lent.

Ending and Beginning

Matt 20.17-19
 Mark 10.32-34
 Luke 18.31-34

On the road to Jerusalem everything was uncertain. Jesus and his disciples were going up to Jerusalem with the third prediction of humiliation, suffering, death and resurrection ringing in their ears.

They knew they were walking into conflict-like migrants approaching a checkpoint knowing their papers are invalid
 -like the throng
 of Palestineans surging through the barrier between Gaza and
 Egypt
 -like the
 challenges of change that we are reluctant to embrace.

We all have known times when we have travelled fearfully into the unknowns of life. On the road to Jerusalem there were no guarantees of avoidance, but there was promise – the promise of resurrection, however that was interpreted.

Question: The same promise is given to us. What do we hear the resurrection saying to us in Otaki-Waikanae?

One of the significant features of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was the continuous presence of community.

The disciples and the other followers of the itinerant Jesus were a community in themselves, and there was always the extended community. They were not alone. They had one another. And so it was as they wound their way up to Jerusalem.

We can imagine the disciples thinking back to the many new beginnings they had experienced. Beginnings of fellowship, of preaching, of healing, of drawing ever deeper into their relationship with God through Jesus – master and servant. But Jesus had said, “I am going to die.”

Was Jesus saying “All is over?” Some may well have thought so. The impact of his predicted death must have been paralytically bewildering, but the disciples stayed together through the shattering experiences of that first Easter. How did they do it?

Did they of necessity find strength in one another? Were memories a strengthening factor? Were they bonded in hope – possibly very frail hope? Hope centred in the experience of having lived with Jesus. Hope difficult to express in words, but hope rooted in love.

Now we approach Holy Week bringing with us knowledge beyond that of the disciples. We live in the reality of Christ’s resurrection. Does this knowing add dimension to our celebration of the passion of Jesus? We are one with the early disciples as we bring memories of fellowship, deepened faith, and thankfulness but we are called into an awareness of future mission. Surely that is the significance of resurrection.

Prayer:

**Help us to accept, O Christ
that our paths may not be smooth
and our journeys may often be risky.**

**Help us to accept
vulnerability with no promise of security.
Help us to give you
devotion with no promise of reward.**

**We don’t know what we’re asking when we ask for these
But give us hands to take the cup you hold out to us
-a cup of companionship;
help us gladly immerse ourselves in the baptism you want
us to share;
and to so know you on the road with us
that all our anxious thoughts of status, security and
reward
wash away,
and we are left with you,
just you,
astonished by your love for us again.**

-John Davies.

