

Bread Power and Safety

(Luke 4:1-13 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on March 6th, 2022)

Just as we thought we were emerging from two years of trauma and tragedy after the pandemic, we find our screens full of horrific images.

Millions flee their homeland looking for safety as war erupts around them. Just as they did one year ago in Myanmar and six months ago in Afghanistan. In our own land, hundreds are calling out to be saved from rising flood waters. In both cases we have seen absolute horror but also amazing acts of heroism as others do all they can to save them.

Many in our world go hungry – the growing crisis in Ukraine, the ongoing starving and famine in Yemen and Afghanistan and many other places in our world. The rest of us have more than we need.

In the past week we have seen the tragic consequences of one man pursuing absolute power and control over the lives of others. Something we have seen before in many places but this time it is on our TV screens 24/7. (As an aside, please turn off your TV's if it gets too much.)

Bread, power and safety – the three issues Jesus finds himself confronted with in the desert.

The desert. There is something about the desert that draws me in. Perhaps it is the colours, the vastness, the sense of the ancient, the stillness, the life that is actually there. Often there is not much to do there but take in its beauty and think and pray.

The desert or wilderness in the bible is the place of encounter with God. For forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert or wilderness. being provided for by God, grumbling as they went, getting to know God and themselves better as they made their way to the land God had prepared for them.

Jesus finds himself in the desert, led by the very same Spirit that alighted on him at his baptism. There he prays and contemplates for forty days and at the end is famished and tested. Tested to prove who he is, to turn rocks into bread to feed himself, to take power and control over the world, to save himself from harm. Each time Jesus turns to his faith for guidance and refuses to take the tests, suggesting that you should not put God to the test.

The question for Jesus, it seems to me, is one of integrity – these tests are not evil in themselves, bread is necessary in the face of starvation, power can be used for good and saving others is a good thing. To gain these things though. would require Jesus to give up his allegiance to God, too high a price for him to pay. Faced with each test he turns back to God. God is the ground of his being and the ground of his confidence. The choices Jesus makes here in the desert will dictate the kind of life he will live and the choices he will make.

As I thought about these three temptations, I found myself looking at the life Jesus leads and find these three themes still present but in very different ways.

Bread – Jesus will go on to share bread with many and often with those normally excluded from society. He would go on to provide bread for multitudes. Finally, he will

share bread with his disciples in an intimate meal that we will re-member later in our service today.

Power – Jesus will spend his life taking on those who exert power over others. He subverts the idea of power, power is only useful when it is shared and when it is given up. In the ultimate act of powerlessness on the cross he opens up the future for all. The greatest power in the end is love.

Safety – Jesus goes about saving people from that which troubles them, binds them, holds them back, with no desire to save himself from the consequences of his action. As death plots are hatched around him, he sets his face resolutely for Jerusalem facing his enemies head on.

As we begin our journey through Lent let us look to these temptations or tests Jesus faced for our inspiration. This story reminds us that Jesus is like us, he is tempted by the same things we are. He calls on his faith to help him withstand the pressure of succumbing to self-serving tests. He knows that God is with him through it all.

We too will find our selves tested and tempted, often the choices will be not between good and evil but between good and better. What we learn from Jesus is how to deal with them. We cannot use God or faith for our own prestige or to dominate others. Rather, God by his Spirit call us to love and enables us to love. After all, our God is a God of grace and generosity, as we too are called to be.

May we all do what we can to help satisfy the physical hunger of others and their hunger for justice. May we follow after Jesus and do all we can to invert the worldly understanding of power, to call into question the exploitation that comes from the exercise of power of another, to use any power we have to empower others. May we be ready to put ourselves in risky situations to save others, to put them before ourselves, just like some of our fellow humans have been doing in Ukraine and in the floods.

And remember God, is with you through it all. Amen.