

## *Questions in the Desert*

*(Preached @ Footscray Baptist Church by Cheryl Williams, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023 - Matt 4:1-11)*

The desert, the wilderness. It can be foreboding, it is expansive and often very quiet. It can be unbearably hot when the sun beats down on the red dirt and shade is sparse. It can be lonely, as few people venture out there. It has it's own beauty. It can be dangerous, especially here in Australia where few live and there are few houses, roads and contacts, miles separate petrol stations and food places, so you need to take food, water, petrol – I found that out the hard way in Kalgoorlie many years ago.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and we find Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Having been baptized by John, we are told he is **led** by the Spirit out into the desert or wilderness for forty days.

The desert or wilderness experience was well known by his ancestors, after all they spent 40 years wandering in it. For them it was a place of testing, a place that was uncomfortable as they thought they would starve.

The desert or wilderness is a challenging place, a place where you are at the mercy of the landscape to a certain extent. A place of solitude, a space to think and perhaps also a place of promise as little flowers pop up between the stones.

So Jesus is out there by himself, perhaps engaging in self reflection before he embarks on his ministry, but out there, away from everything that was familiar, away from the bustle of his normal life, and he is fasting and praying. After fasting for forty days, he is understandably famished. After forty days he hears three questions, he is given three choices or challenges. The tempter is never seen only heard. The questions or choices in themselves are not completely bad, but in Jesus' responses we see how he is forming himself for the tasks that lie ahead.

So, let's look at the three questions in the desert.

First, why not if you are the Son of God command these stones to become bread, given you must be so hungry.

Secondly, if you really are the Son of God, why not throw yourself off that tall rock face, as you will be okay, the angels will save you.

Thirdly, looking out over the city from a high spot, the question was why not take it all, all you have to do is worship another.

In some senses none of these questions are completely bad, food when you are hungry is a good thing. Being saved is not so bad either. Gaining influence might also be okay.

Jesus in no uncertain terms refuses all the offers, quoting Scripture, perhaps to strengthen his resolve. Life comes from the word of God, don't test God and worship only the Lord your God and serve only Him.

In this encounter in the desert, we see both Jesus' humanity and his divinity. He is offered food, safety and power – temptations we too are very familiar with. We live in a materialistic world where we are tempted daily to have more stuff, not just the basics to survive. We live in a world where we have become a bit paranoid about our security – look at the arms we have or want and give to others. We live in a world where we want influence, to change people's minds about all kinds of things. Jesus knew these very powerful desires and there is the possibility that he could be tempted by them – this makes him like us, this means he understands us. However, we also see in Jesus, the bigger picture.

Jesus won't turn stones to bread to satisfy his own hunger as he knows there are many in the world who are hungry and poor and he has come to ease their burden.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus won't avoid his humanness and deny his mortality and save himself, as that option is not available to others, and he has come to serve them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus won't seek wealth and glory as he knows many do not have such options and he has come to serve the outcasts, the hurting, the powerless.<sup>3</sup>

After these questions and temptations which I think strengthened his call and resolve, which formed him in some way, which helped him figure out who he was, he begins his ministry, confirming he will not take the easy way out, he will tread the path before him.

So, what do we learn from Jesus' example?

As people of faith, we will be tested, we will be challenged, we will have to think about what is really important. Sometimes the choices we will have to make will be between good and better not just good and evil.

As people of faith, we will have to confront ourselves with our humanness, with our human desires, with our shadow side and make a stand for God.

As people of faith, we need reminding that God cannot be used for power and prestige and the gathering of wealth, as the church we must resist such challenges and remind ourselves we are to serve rather than be served.

As we journey through Lent, may we resist the temptations to amass more than we need, to abuse any power we may have and to bow to corrupt power for our own gain. May we

---

<sup>1</sup> This discussion found in a poem by Andrew King on his blog 'A Poetic Kind of Place'

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

find strength in the words of God and the example of Jesus to stand up for who and what is important.

If you chose to give up something for Lent (and I did and think my resolve only lasted hours), may it focus your attention on what is important in your faith journey, what is important in your calling and may you know God's presence with you in every moment. Amen.