



The First Sunday of Lent
9 March 2014

What do you seek?

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

Brother, what do you seek? Sister, what do you seek? This question, or a question very similar, is often asked of novices seeking to take their vows or promises before they become a full member or monk in a religious community. It is a good question I think, for each one of us. It is in many ways the perfect question for Lent “What do you seek?”

What do you seek? A lot of the time actually we are just following everyone else. Keeping up, as it were. Doing what is expected of us, like commuters being channelled up and down the escalators and along the tunnels. There is, of course, in all of us a strong instinct to conform and, if we rebel, to conform in our rebellion. Teenagers for example, are often the age group that is considered rebellious or non-conformist. And yet watching a television programme last week about teenagers at a pop concert I was struck by how incredibly conformist those featured in the documentary were – conforming to the role of drinking as much alcohol as they possibly could, conforming to getting their bodies tattooed and pierced, conforming in the way they dressed and in the way they danced and in the common desire they shared to pick someone up for the night. I was aware what an incredible amount of peer pressure there was to actually seek what was leading to vomiting and an incredible hangover. ‘Don’t be like everyone,’ the advertising companies persuade us, ‘you must be special, different, unique,’ but actually we are being seduced into buying what other people have so we can become like everyone else. How much freedom is there in that?

What are you seeking? Is it to be rich, or to be successful at work? Are you seeking affirmation or someone’s love, or as someone said the other day are you seeking simply to get through the day? What do you seek?

I had an American friend called Russ who taught theology, and he always used to say “I am seeking the face of God.” It sounded rather over the top. Actually, come to think about it, what a wonderful thing to seek – to see the face of God in the most incredibly diverse people and circumstances and miraculous world. When a person at the Taizé community is professed as a brother they are asked what they seek and they answer in their promises, “I seek the mercy of God and the community of my brothers.” This is also a beautifully wise answer. For do we not all depend on the mercy and love of God and the fellowship of one another, and are not these treasures so much more important than the make of your car or the size of your reputation? But how do we learn what it is we really seek? Well, if we look at the story of God’s people it is through the experience of going into the wilderness. It was in the wilderness experience that the Jews fleeing from Egypt were formed as a community in covenant with God and one another. It was in the wilderness that Jesus defines his coming ministry. Today I would like to consider three elements of that wilderness experience: fleeing, staying, and praying.

First, fleeing.

Perhaps all of us in our armoury, stored away in our imagination have an escape route, a way out, a way of fleeing the world. Perhaps that route is a holiday you look forward to or plan, or a favourite place, a retreat, or a friend or partner who will accept you unconditionally. Perhaps that escape is death itself. Perhaps all of us toy at some stage of our lives with walking out, ending something

once and for all, beginning again – finding a new life like Shirley Valentine – even if it's just a seven day package tour. Yet not long after the fleeing there often comes the realisation that our demons have not all been left behind but have followed us into our place of escape. In fact the enemy we long to escape most is the enemy within. Notice the way that it is when Jesus goes into the desert to fast that he is confronted by the devil, and that it is in the ultimate wilderness of the cross, outside the city wall, seemingly abandoned by his followers and also by God, that redemption begins. We notice this same movement in the Desert Fathers. The desert, far from being a place of escape, is in fact a place of conflict where one is forced to renounce diversion and in the words of Thomas Merton, heal in oneself the sins of the world. St Anthony for example flees the town for the desert, and seeking to follow Christ finds himself attacked by the devil. St Athanasius, recording his life tells of how:

The devil, who hates and envies what is good, could not endure to see such a resolution in Anthony, and... tried to lead him away from the discipline, whispering to him the remembrance of his wealth, care for his sister, claims of kindred, love of money, love of glory, the various pleasures of the table and the other relaxations of life, and at last the difficulty of virtue and the labour of it; he suggested also the infirmity of the body and the length of the time. In a word he raised in his mind a great dust of debate.

How many of us have for all our good intentions and resolution found the place of solitude, not the peaceful place we dreamed it would be? Fleeing the ways of the world involves, like the prodigal, often a painful coming to our senses. This grappling with one's own demons is costly because it seems to demand everything, the loss of self in order to make room for the life of God in us. TS Eliot in his Four Quartets writes of the poet 'purifying the dialect of his tribe.' The desert frees us from the mask, the pretence, the conformity to the prejudices of our society, the games of control – purifies us by the gift of his Spirit which allows for a new language of integrity, truthfulness and simplicity. And perhaps our desert maybe sitting in the bus station, or airport lounge, or the doctor's waiting room, at the hospital bedside, or an office full of people after a conflict, or an empty flat, the text message that is never truly answered. It is the time that allows us to recognise what in fact we truly seek – the treasure buried in the field that will be the focus of this year's Lent Study; the God who surprises us.

Second, Staying.

In the desert Jesus faces his fears and his doubts. Far from fleeing, Jesus refuses the way of miraculous power – to give the people what they want. He refuses to deny his human mortality and throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to prove that he is superhuman and that the angels will protect him. He refuses to take the path of worldly power and worship the devil in a way we have so often seen: absolute power corrupting the leaders of our world.

Instead, Jesus chooses to stay in the world and to be of the world. There is a fidelity here. The call of Christ is to discover God in the body that we are, a body that can be hurt, a body that can die. And it is here in us that God's kingdom can begin now. So Lent is a call to rediscover a stability, a perseverance, a God-centred patience. This 'staying-power', this 'discipline' in faith is something that has often been downplayed in more liberal churches. But it is as fundamental to our faith as training is to an athlete, or perseverance is to a mountain climber. St Benedict, in his rule of life for monks, believed that when we came up against aridity, temptation and conflict in our spiritual life we should not run away fearful and terrified but stay where we are and suffer the indignity of present imperfection – to allow grace to work its wonders in its own good time. It is through perseverance, and the practice of regular patient commitment to God that we begin to discover a far greater freedom than we have hitherto known.

Third, Praying.

How easily our prayers can become tired, worn out, or formulaic. The prayer of the desert is anything but. It is opening ourselves up to the reality of God; discovering again in us the wellsprings of our lives. Paul describes the Spirit of God praying within us with sighs too deep for words. Neither is prayer simply getting a good feeling from God like a form of beautiful relaxation or God entertainment. It can be that, but it is actually bringing all that we are before God again and again and again. Prayer doesn't begin over there in the perfect place, when you have found the perfect church, the perfect community. No, it begins here and now in your present situation. In the middle of the mess.

St Augustine wrote, 'Because I am human I am weak. Because I am weak I pray.' In our prayers we are not praying to turn stones into bread, or for superhuman protection or power. Prayer is recognising that our dreams cannot be fulfilled on the basis of our own resources. We need the help of God. The only way to pray, is to pray, and the way to pray well is to pray much – to be permeated by prayer. Pray as if your life depends on God's love. It does. Pray with regularity. Regular means a rule, an observance; it means having a structure. "I have no time!" I hear you say. But you surely have time for coffee, for meals, to brush your teeth? Most of us have time for television and to hear endlessly repeating news reports, and for shopping and for tea breaks. So how about prayer? Prayer is not encroaching on your freedom, it is offering you the greatest freedom of all: helping you discern what in your life you really seek and how, with God's help, to get there.

So to summarise: Remember this Lent – fleeing, staying, praying. Flee from all that leads to pride and distraction. Stay faithful to your rule – persevere in times of trouble. And pray, pray at all times. And God will continue to surprise you.

I began by asking what it is you seek. I want you to ask that question now. What is it you seek?

We shall seek and we shall find
We shall rest and we shall see
We shall see and we shall know,
We shall know and we shall love,
We shall love and we shall praise.
Behold our end which is no end.