

## **Sermon 6th March 2022**

**Wet and washed, Jesus walked out of the river, full of God, full of God's Spirit. That Holy Spirit led him into the wild land west of the Jordan River. He headed for the wilderness out of which his cousin John had come, preaching, and calling people to come to God and be cleansed in the waters of the Jordan. John had come with a promise that One more powerful than he would come full of the Breath of God and burn with Holy Fire. John found that promised One at the baptism of Jesus. There the surrounding waters stirred Jesus and as he surfaced from the Jordan, these words rang in his ears: 'You are my beloved child. You are my delight. You are my love.' Witnesses to Jesus' baptism watched a man fill with God's Spirit, and they wondered what would come from this day.**

**Jesus, filled with God, awakened to a compelling, driving certainty that he must go into the wilderness where people often went to fast and pray. The wilderness provided the open, silent space needed for seeking direction and purpose. Tradition has it that Jesus climbed into a high cave of Mt. Quarantal, a place which is today the location of the Monastery of the Temptation. This high place in the wilderness west of the Jordan, less than a day's walk from Jericho, for centuries has attracted God's seekers. In caves in the Quarantal, people would fast and pray, seeking needed answers. I have been lucky enough to visit and spend time in prayer within the Monastery of Temptation. It truly is a bleak and barren place. Jesus, now certain of being loved and touched by God, needed the answers that a forty-day discipline might bring.**

**In the cold, dark cave, Jesus waited and watched. Deprived of the comfort of water, food, and warmth, Jesus tested his spiritual muscles. Three times God's Adversary came testing Jesus, tempting him to forget his baptismal identity and to use his new power for personal comfort and gain, political influence, and glory, even free himself from suffering and death. Three times Jesus turned his back on the Adversary and embraced living a life of compassion as God's servant.**

Love revealed in Jesus, shaped, and tested by the forty-day discipline, has for generations called us to our own vocations. While each person must discover (or uncover) specific meanings of God's call, we all share in the baptismal certainties:

We are all God's children  
We are all God's delight,  
We are all God's love.

Yet time and time again we deny our baptismal identity. We forget our baptismal realities. We carelessly allow confusion to rule and let fears bargain for assurances inferior to what God promises or desires. We trade love for short-term profits. Misplaced identity brings confusion and disorientation that seeks from religion personal gain rather than wholeness and holiness. Success rather than transformation becomes our mission. Worldly wealth provides the measure of our worth, instead of allowing God's grace to grant personal significance. Religion founded on fear and guilt chooses personal comfort over faithful living. We make compromises that weaken our resolve to stand firm in God's blessed assurance. All this we do because, at all costs, we seek to avoid sacrifice, suffering, and death, the very things love embraces.

God surprises us by bringing transforming love through Christ's incarnating presence. A surprising paradox reveals God's continual presence using sacrifice, suffering, and even death as the media through which we find love, wholeness, and life. God uses that which we avoid to provide that which we most deeply desire. Four strong desires shape our hope:

We desire to belong.  
We desire to be loved and to love.  
We desire to make a difference, to contribute.  
We desire to continue, to endure, to last even beyond death.

Each generation must rediscover God's revealing presence that reaches into our intense longing. Augustine of Hippo walked from village to village teaching and preaching the good news that restless hearts will find peace in God.

Centuries later, Francis of Assisi danced, sang, and loved his way through Europe, making Christ's abundant love visible through the starkness of his self-imposed poverty. Spanish Christians defied the fear-driven Inquisitions, as they followed Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross into ever-deepening prayer that revealed that we humans are made of love, filled with love, and meant for love. Communities of Christians today in Ukraine are gathering today in bunkers and amongst the destruction reaped by sin, sharing in the Eucharist, revealing once more that evil can never vanquish love, that the war has already been lost, that the victory has already been achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If we are love, then why does such separation and destruction run so freely through our personal, social, and national histories? Two fundamental reasons echo from generation to generation. First, we are asleep to the truth; we do not realize who we are and what we are for. Second, we misplace our love; we become attached to things other than God. Every time our selfish desires deny and diminish the other we turn away from God and we remain asleep to the truth, attached to the trappings of abusive power, disregarding the whirlwind of suffering we cause. We become bad news.

The Good News is that God, regardless of our actions, actively engages in our lives, sending us wake up calls, one after another. Once we entertain the possibility that God dwells within each soul, then we free ourselves to choose. We can choose to listen for love, to seek love, and to allow love to awaken within.

The season of Lent brings opportunities to us to awaken to God's love. Over the next six weeks, be attentive and notice who speaks Love to us. Who reveals God's heart to us? Who affirms for us that we belong to God, that we are love, and that our significance and our mutual flourishing rests in compassionate giving?

For unless we are attentive and show up for prayer, unless we participate fully in worship, rather just be present; unless we dare to trust that we have God at the centre of our being; unless we dare are to ask, seek, and find Love within; unless we pray - not with wordy, noisy, chattering instructions to God,

but with the kind of praying that sits in quiet, expectant listening, watching and waiting for our awakening to love's reality – unless we pray with our soul's ears, instead of our mind's chatter, we are likely to remain asleep to the truth of God's call on us. This Lent dare to reflect, learn and respond to God's call on us through mining our own personal experience of the times we have heard within us God's still, small voice.

And let Teresa of Avila's poem fortify us this Lent as we dare to risk listening for God and to God. Teresa of Avila wrote these words as her own response to God's still small voice within her:

Soul, you must seek yourself in Me  
And in yourself seek Me.  
With such skill, soul Love  
could portray you in Me.  
That a painter well gifted  
Could never show  
So finely that image.

For love you were fashioned  
Deep within me  
Painted so beautiful, so fair;  
If, my beloved, you are lost,  
Soul seek yourself in Me.

Amen