

ADDRESS 22 February 2015

First Sunday in Lent

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Genesis 9. 8-17	<i>Covenant with Noah</i>
Psalms 25. 1-10	<i>Prayer for Guidance and Deliverance</i>
I Peter 3.18-22	<i>Suffering and death of Christ</i>
Mark 1.9-15	<i>Jesus' baptism, temptation, beginning of ministry</i>

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*Lord, open our hearts to hear your Word, and to do your will.*

On Wednesday we began our Lenten journey by reading Jesus' warning against hypocrisy, as recorded in the gospel according to Matthew, his warning against showing off our piety in order to look good. And so we rubbed the ashes off our forehead before we left the church, so that people would not look at us and know we had been to church, or simply wonder why we hadn't washed our faces.

There is often a disconnect between what we hear and do and say in church, and what is happening outside the church – what has Ezekiel's chariot, or Noah's rescue from the flood, or even Christ's temptation in the desert got to do with our day-to-day concerns -- our family, our health, our work, our cooking and cleaning and washing and ironing and gardening? Very little, unless we study God's will for us, and for all humankind, and do our bit to make sure that God's will is done in our little part of earth as it is done in heaven.

Today's Gospel reading is Mark's summary account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry – three events: Jesus is baptised; Jesus is tempted or tested (the Greek word Mark uses can mean either or both); then, in the strength of his victory over evil, Jesus reaches out to others with the good news of the kingdom of God. We have been baptised, we are continually being tempted or tested, but have we moved on to reach out to others with the good news? Or have we stopped at the testing-time? Have we failed one or more of our testings?

The chairman of ABM is coming in a few weeks to tell us about the work of ABM in northern Australia and overseas, and we have a mission field right here. It's shown in the table in *Connections*.

#### OUR MISSION FIELD

	Total residents	Anglican	No religion
South Hurstville	4928	595	1042
Connell's Point	2702	489	290
Kyle Bay	837	142	116
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8467</b>	<b>1226</b>	<b>1448</b>

The last census recorded that, in 2011, almost 8½ thousand people were living in the 3½ sq km of South Hurstville and Connell's Point and Kyle Bay. Just over 1 200 of them identified as Anglicans. How many of those were involved with this church, or with any other church? Very few. Our footprint in this area is very small. As we know, many of us do not live in South Hurstville or Connell's Point or Kyle Bay. Including Marty and myself. We worship here because we feel the traditional liturgy brings us closer to God and invites us to think for ourselves, rather than being told what to think; and we hear more about God's forgiveness and grace than we hear about the Devil and all his works. Most of the time, anyway.

In South Hurstville nearly twice as many as those who identify as Anglicans say they have no religion; in Connell's Point and Kyle Bay, the numbers are closer. Here is our mission field – the people who live around us, especially those who identify as Anglicans, and those who say they have no religion. You know some of those people; you can proclaim the good news to them – in the way and at the right time. The first epistle of Peter tells us how and assures us that God will supply the moment– here's a key verse that comes just before the epistle for today:

*Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* That's from chapter 3, verses 15 and 16.

So, no! You don't confront people with, *Are you saved?* You speak to people gently and respectfully and you do it when the time is right, at the moment the voice of God within you says **Now!**

In so many ways, the story of the people of Israel prefigures the story of Jesus' life: his journey from the humility of the manger to the glory of heaven has many parallels with his people's journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. In the same way, the story of Jesus' life can prefigure our story, if we allow ourselves to be led by God, as he did.

So, firstly, Jesus is baptised. So were we. We were not immersed, most of us anyway, we had water poured over us, or we were sprinkled with water, so we missed some of the symbolism of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism had three stages – into the water, under the water and out of the water. Baptism by immersion. And as Jesus was coming out of the water the power of God came upon him, for Jesus was baptised for ministry. And so are we.

Baptism needs to be more than a naming ceremony, more than a family celebration, more than an occasion for cute baby photos – baptism should be, and can be, about the power of God descending upon us, and empowering us to overcome our later testing and, having overcome, to go on to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Secondly, Jesus is tempted. He was baptised as an adult, so his time of testing followed straight on from his baptism. Most of us were baptised as children, so quite a few years pass before we have to face our adult temptations. In the Western church, boys and girls are confirmed right about the time many of these temptations begin, and, until quite recently, when most parishes had a clutch of boys and girls being confirmed together, the confirmation service became a kind of graduation ceremony: it marked the time to pass out from the church fellowship to deal with the pressing issues of study, and finding a job and a partner and a home, and beginning a family – issues that often seemed more important than continuing to honour God.

Mark does not tell us what Jesus' temptations were, but the gospels of Matthew and Luke do – Jesus was tempted to meet his human needs without working for them, Jesus was tempted to do something spectacular to win people's attention, Jesus was tempted to live by the world's values, rather than by God's values. And isn't that our story? So often we say 'I want' – I want to have more money, I want to be good-looking, I want the perfect partner, or someone else's partner, I want to be popular, I want to be able to sing, or dance or write or paint or play the piano, and I want a guilt-free short-cut to everything I want. The children of Israel spent 40 years on the desert before they reached their promised land; Jesus returned to heaven only after enduring the pain of rejection and the humiliation of the Cross. There were no short cuts.

So often we confuse the gifts of God with sheer good luck. Some men and women are more handsome, more beautiful than others. Or better off than other. Why is that? Is that fair? What is God doing? It's not God, it's our genes. Or worse, we see our bad luck as our being abandoned or ignored by God, perhaps even as a punishment from God. Some men and women suffer more bad health than others, some have accidents which cripple or disfigure them, some people are physically or intellectually disabled. Many are poor. Why is that? Is that fair? What is God doing?

What the Scriptures teach us, and what the life of Jesus teaches us, is that God is with us whatever our luck or our circumstances – richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, until death parts us from the world and takes us to him. For everyone our God eases the burden by sharing it; for some there is the gift of healing, a gift which cannot be predicted or explained, both a miracle and a mystery.

Mark says, when Jesus was being tempted, he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited upon him. He was telling us symbolically that, by resisting temptation, Jesus made the desert a new Eden, his kingdom will restore the time when human beings and wild beasts lived at peace with each other and the angels helped care for humanity, before they had to drive them out of the garden with a flaming sword. The moral of the Gospel story is clear – what God created, man

destroyed; what man destroyed God can restore: if we pass the test, if we overcome our temptations, we can again be at peace with each other and with him.

God may not make us sing like Pavarotti or Maria Callas, or be as good-looking or as popular as George Clooney or Nicole Kidman, or become rich or famous, or enjoy continuous good health. Good luck has a lot to do with all of those. What God does do, if we allow him, is stay close to us, to make the good times even better, and the bad times bearable.

I've learned a lot from Rosemary and Doris and Joan and some of the other women and men I meet in the nursing homes we visit each month— and from the staff. It takes some of the residents a long time to be got ready for our service – and the services are held late in the morning or in the afternoon so that the painkillers have time to work. But they greet me with a smile, and some of them whisper '*Thank you*' as I offer them the sacrament with one hand and hold their hand gently with the other. In spite of everything, they know, somehow, that God is with them, and they are happy, even if they don't understand their feelings, or they can't express them.

So how did Jesus pass his tests? How did he overcome his temptations? The gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us -- by drawing on the word of God and applying it to his own situation. Jesus knew his Torah, and all three of the texts which helped him overcome his temptations come from the one recorded address by Moses to his people as they came near to the end of their dread-full journey through the desert. *Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.* (Deut. 8.3) *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.* (Deut. 6.16) *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.* (Deut. 6.13)

These are words that we should call to mind every time we are tested – why neglect God and our family and friends or even cheat and lie to become well-off? *Man does not live by bread alone, but on the Word of God.* Why blame God for our misfortunes, or try to bargain with God, 'I'll believe in you if you can get me through this?' *You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.* Why spend our Sundays playing sport or going to family celebrations or community events or working in the garden, whatever we do, and neglect to worship and thank God? *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*

Overcoming his temptations gave Jesus the divine strength to begin his ministry. *Jesus came to Galilee*, the place where he spent most of his life, his South Hurstville, his Connell's Point, his Kyle Bay; *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.* And as his ministry continued there were new challenges to face, and new temptations to overcome –*Lord if you will, take this cup from me, but your will be done.* Three of the gospels record this cry of pain, and you can hear the same cry at many times and many places as people deal with their

temptations in the power of the Holy Spirit Of God, the Spirit which came upon Jesus at his baptism and stayed with him throughout his ministry.

Jesus was baptised for ministry; so are we. Jesus was tested and triumphed, so can we. Jesus taught others about the kingdom, and served others, lived for others. So should we. This is one of the many reasons that it's good to observe the season of Lent every year. Lent calls us back to the basics of our faith – Lent calls us to give up some of our pleasures and more of our money and more of our time to help proclaim and extend the Kingdom of God. And, as we learned on Ash Wednesday, we need to do that in secret, not showing off to other people.

So let us resolve to pray more this Lent, and to read God's Word more, and to listen more often and more closely to his voice; let our lives have less of self and more of God, so that he can stand with us and motivate us and strengthen us in his service.      The Lord be with you. #

