

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Lent 1
25 February 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Deuteronomy 26.1-11; Psalm 91.1-2,9-16; Romans 10.4-13; Luke 4.1-15

Memes – ideas as viruses

The busyness of our lives can very easily make us tired and rather solemn crowding out a sense of playfulness and celebration of life. One morning this week as I was driving Pam to the station we were talking about the busy day ahead when I said something that made Pam laugh and I was moved to say something like, “There should be more of that we’re both so busy we’ve become much too solemn and serious. Let’s give up solemnity and seriousness for Lent and take up laughter and joy.” It was said playfully but as we laughed again I thought you know that’s not such a bad idea – worth pursuing. So I share it with you – link it to the piece in this week’s Connections, *A Special Lenten Fast*.

A Special Lenten Fast

Give up harsh words: use generous ones.

Give up unhappiness: take up gratitude.

Give up anger: take up gentleness and patience.

Give up pessimism: take up hope and optimism.

Give up worrying: take up trust in God.

Give up complaining: value what you have.

Give up stress: take up prayer.

Give up judging others: discover Jesus within them.

Give up sorrow and bitterness: fill your heart with joy.

Give up selfishness: take up compassion for others.

Give up being unforgiving: learn reconciliation.

Give up words: fill yourself with silence, and listen to others.

Anonymous, from Latin America

In his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins proposed that ideas act like viruses or genes, passing from one host to another and competing for survival. Dawkins referred to ideas as "memes" (rhymes with dreams). A meme is basically a contagious idea that replicates itself, passing from mind to mind. Successful memes infect a large number of hosts, while unsuccessful ones die out. As memes replicate, they also change or mutate much as genes do. If these changes are more successful than the original memes, then they will eventually out-compete the originals.

While Dawkins didn't personally develop the concept very much, subsequent theorists have embraced and expanded upon his original concept of ideas functioning like genes. Memes are of special interest to the activist since they help explain how some ideas take hold in the mainstream and others do not; indeed, memetics is a useful tool for understanding propaganda, beliefs, religion, and the whole of human culture. Through understanding memetics, citizens and activists can not only understand and discard memes that have infected their own minds, but also create

counter-memes or anti-memes that will infect others. Memes such as "the war on terrorism is not just," and "peace is patriotic" can combat memes such as "this is a battle between good and evil" and "if you're not with us, you're against us."

We see something of this being played out in the temptations of Jesus which we have just heard as our Gospel reading and which all 3 of the first 3 Gospel writers include as the very beginning of Jesus public ministry after his baptism. It doesn't matter whether one believes in an outside Personified devil or whether one believes that such thoughts/temptations come from within ourselves, picked up from our own experience of life, from the values and ideas instilled in us through home and family and the wider society around us. The reality is such thoughts ideas come and they tempt Jesus as indeed they do us. Notice the temptations are very subtle. They come in at the point of his own personal need – his hunger and also his sense of purpose and identity. Luke has just told his readers that at Jesus' baptism there had been the voice from heaven affirming, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased." Ok if that's the case comes the temptation there are powers that are rightly yours use them to prove who you are, to met your hunger and to bring about your kingdom and help those for whom you have most concern..

But Jesus knows that there are no short cuts, that there are some other ideas that are more enduring and creative. To paraphrase, Food's not everything it takes a lot more than bread to make life worth living. It's easy to make power into a God, it's one of the many false Gods in our world but there is only one true God and his service that matters and one doesn't need to test God.

Jesus is able to respond in this way because as a good Jew he is well versed in the Hebrew scriptures – that body of writings that contain the collective wisdom of his people. The positive ideas and memes that give guidance and direction for life.

So returning to the concept of ideas as memes or viruses it seems to me that this makes good sense and has all sorts of applications – particularly if one allows that "virus" and "infects" can have a positive and not just a pejorative meaning. It is a useful way of understanding the vastly different approaches to being Christian. Those who focus on human sin and God's rescue plan in Jesus might be said to have been infected by the meme of "Original Sin" whilst those who focus on the fact that all persons are created in the image of God and therefore have at their core something of great value and worth might be said to have been infected by the meme of "Original Blessing".

One of the questions in the Lent study book, "Every Day with Jesus" focuses on this when it asks, "What values in today's world confront and challenge us as followers of Jesus?" There are values, ideas that act like memes using Dawkins understanding of the word - A meme is basically a contagious idea that replicates itself, passing from mind to mind. Successful memes infect a large number of hosts, while unsuccessful ones die out.

I've already mentioned a few, Original Sin, Original Blessing, the war on terror is a battle between good and evil (and God is on our side), and the war on terrorism is not just the end does not justify the means.

Some others that quickly come to mind as I think about Australian society are:

- Look after number one first – if you don't look after yourself no-one else will
- If it feels good it must be OK so go for it

- It's Ok to minimize tax – even cheat a bit if you can get away with it – its only wrong if you get caught
- One's got to be tough with offenders and terrorists
- National security and border protection are top priority

Where might one go to find counter-memes – what better place than to where Jesus turns as he is tempted? – to our sacred writings! It is no good if we have to stop to search out what might be a creative response – need to instilled deep within us so have automatic response when recognize something that is potentially destructive. Means need to read the bible uncommonly often – not so can quote a verse but rather more importantly are in tune with its underlying central themes and values. We need to be so familiar with the values and standards of Jesus that they kick in automatically – like driving a car – at first when learning takes a lot of concentration gradually can do it without thinking, it becomes instinctive so too it can be with our living out God's kingdom life.

Here's a few suggestions to set you thinking about appropriate counter –memes to those prevailing in society at large. They reveal some of my bias's – we'll all have our own particular sense of what is important and best reflects our understanding of the values of the Gospel.

- Be ye compassionate as God is compassionate (Jesus)
- Go and do the same – love your neighbour as yourself (Jesus)
- We need not restrict ourselves to the Bible but can also helpfully use the wider corpus of Christian life and experience so here is one from the life of St Anthony - Our life and death is with our neighbour If we win our brother (and sister), we win God. If we cause our brother (sister) to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.
- Seek the welfare of your enemies for in their welfare lies your welfare (Jeremiah 29)
- But I say to you love your enemies, do good to those who abuse you (Jesus)
- Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God (Micah)
- I have come that you may know the truth and the truth will set you free (Jesus)
- Meanwhile these 3 things abide faith , hope and love (St Paul) – a counter to the post modernist view that everything is relative – there are no absolutes, nothing is permanent!

The challenge is to recognize those memes which are distortions of the truth and therefore likely to be destructive for us, individually and collectively and to identify counter-memes which will lead us and God's world into the Shalom which Jesus reveals and calls us to share in creating.