



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

14th February 2016

© 2016 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

We are now in the Church season of Lent. It is the annual time for self-discipline, reflection and turning more towards God.

Lent is a period of forty days modelled on Jesus' 40 days of testing in the wilderness and the 40 years of wilderness wanderings experienced by the Israelites. If you are observant you might have realised that from Ash Wednesday to Easter is more than 40 days it is 46 days. How does that work?

The answer is Sunday is never a fast day – it is always a day to celebrate the resurrection. So if you take away the six Sundays in Lent, you get down to 40 days!

In Lent, we are encouraged to fast, to pray and to give.

Fasting is depriving ourselves of a basic necessary. It reminds us our utter dependency on God. It is not about setting aside minor luxuries. It says to God that we are serious about the issue – it matters more than whatever has been put aside.

Giving: What we is entrusted to us is not meant for us alone – but for us to share with others for the service of others.

Praying: We are not totally self-sufficient. We have a need inside of us that cannot be filled by ourselves or others. We have a holy longing and must look to God.

Temptation and Fasting

The gospel account tells of Jesus being tested to see whether he will fall as Eve and Adam fell. The temptations are subtle. Jesus would multiply food later, he would do miracles which drew the attention of crowds and he will be ruler of all the earth. But the temptations were to do them the wrong way, or for the wrong reason. The end does not justify the means.

We all experience temptations. This account from Jesus' experience warns us that the strongest temptations we will experience are those that give the impression that what the devil wants is the same as what God wants. The best lies have a lot of truth in them. So, what we learn from Jesus' example?

Firstly, we should be aware of the importance of the Holy Spirit in the story. The Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness, that is, what is going to happen there is part of God's plan. Jesus was full of the Spirit. The

implication is that this was vital for the battle which followed. The Holy Spirit strengthened Jesus and brought to his mind the Scriptures he quoted.

Paul says we can only overcome the struggle with sin by the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Galatians 5:16-17 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

Where there are temptations we need to ask Jesus to be our strength to overcome them. Our sinful nature is not just weak it actively draws us into sin. We need to learn to rely on the Holy Spirit within us to fight for us.

Secondly, Jesus responds with Scripture. He quotes scriptures back as his defence, one does not live by bread alone, only God is to be worshipped, and God is not to be tested. Paul likens the Word of God to a sword so ask God to bring to your memory scriptures you can use to counter the temptations you face.

Giving - First fruits – stewardship

The Old Testament passage is from Moses’ summarizing the 40 years of wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. He was about to die, they would move on to enter the promised land. He spoke to them reminding them of the events of the previous 40 years and the covenant God had made with them.

Coming into the land, receiving the inheritance God had promised them was hugely significant. It was right to acknowledge what God had done for them. The First Fruit was the first part of the harvest. The first fruit of the fruit trees, the first ears of wheat to be reaped, the first animals born in the flocks. The offering was to demonstrate that God was to one who had brought this about.

Imagine what it was like for them: They had been enslaved, forced to make bricks for the Egyptian building programme knowing toil and suffering. They had been released by God when he pressured Pharaoh into letting his people go. They had crossed the wilderness towards the land he had promised them but then had refused to trust when it came to the point of entry. In their fear, they turned away and spoke against God. As a consequence, he led them to wander for 40 years until all those adult men had died, then their children were brought into the land.

After they had settled into the land and raised crops, when they had something to show for being free people, then they were to remember it was God who gave them the land and brought them to freedom, so they should show gratitude. So it was that when they brought their offering, they were to declare this background history:

<i>I have come to the land that the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us.</i>	- God’s promise has been fulfilled; he has been faithful towards me; his word is true.
<i>My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people ...</i>	- we had nothing.
<i>The Egyptians ill-treated us and put us to hard labour</i>	- we were oppressed.
<i>Then we cried out to the LORD ... so the LORD brought us out of Egypt ... with miraculous signs and wonders.</i>	– he delivered us.
<i>He gave us this land and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.</i>	– he has been good to me.

And they were to share it with others: the Levites (religious workers) and foreigners (who had no land) and rejoice together in the provision and faithfulness of the Lord.

That was an initial thanksgiving. Have you noticed that God values thanksgiving? Remember Jesus and the ten lepers?

Luke 17:12-19 ¹² ... ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him--and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no-one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Jesus is surprised - even shocked - that the nine did not return to say thank you.

At the first service here in the new church we had a wonderful time of giving thanks to God for what he had done. At the end of that part of the service, Max Cranch, got up and said he had never prophesied before, but he believed God was saying he was pleased with our thanks. "So often my people ask me for things but never say thank you."

It may be that after last week's sermon, you have prophesied, or spoken in tongues or interpreted for the first time. Don't neglect to thank him for the gift. And don't neglect the gift itself.

The First Fruit offering continued as an annual offering as harvests came in. Do you see how it is a model for us of expressing gratitude to God? Some of us have adopted this way of acknowledging God as the source of all we have. It is not compulsory but as we think about giving in Lent, maybe we can find ways to give to God to thank him for his provision for us. It may be a challenge but I assure you it becomes a delight and a joy.

There are a number of needs coming up which we need to consider supporting:

- The Hope Project Phase 3 – more about that next week;
- Our annual support for Bishop Given's stipend we will bring that before you next month as usual;
- It is necessary and healthy for us to review our committed giving regularly – since we looking at stewardship in the Lenten studies, it seems a good time to bring this to a focus which we will do in mid-March.
- At the same time, we all know that our worship of God needs to be with words, with money and with our actions – so it is good to review how we can contribute to his work in the local church, the wider church and how we can be guided in his ways in our personal responsibilities and areas of influence. Roy's teaching on Spiritual Gifting has struck a chord with many of you – don't let's forget those ideas or the results of the self-assessment test he gave out. We will want to see how those gifts can be applied.