



First Sunday Lent 2005

Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

If we want to understand how to approach our Lenten journey we need to revisit that passage from Isaiah that was the first reading of last Sunday.

Isaiah asks some searching questions. "Why do you fast if you do not have a better vision of your work as disciple? What is the point of being humble if it doesn't help you become more aware?"

I don't think we have thought of fasting except as a sort of penance. Yet Isaiah sees it as a tool to helping us become more god-like.

What real fasting is, is the on-going work for justice; freeing the oppressed, working to end hunger; providing homes for all.

In the readings today we are given to great testing stories; the testing of Eve in Genesis and the testing of Jesus from Matthew.

In the Jewish tradition testing is an important concept. It usually marks the movement of the person from one life moment to another. We know from our life experience that after a time of testing or trial we are changed. Some of the testing times in our history have been illness, drug or alcohol dependency, divorce or death. Some testings times have been around choices about future action or future life direction.

Both of the scripture stories use myth and symbol to convey the reality of what is a highly personal struggle. When we are trying to describe our feelings we often rely on images to convey our meaning. We speak of having butterflies in our stomach or of being swamped by waves of depression. What attracts us to some writers is their ability to choose images that we resonate with.

For Eve the testing is about boundaries, how far can I go? In her dialogue with the serpent Eve shows not only that she is aware of God's command she also adds a rider to it. She adds that they must not touch, so Eve recognises that to place oneself in proximity to temptation is to endanger oneself.

Eve studied the tree in the light of the wiliness of the serpent explanation and having seen the tree's good qualities chooses to follow her own judgement. The serpent of today is probably the power of advertising. We are constantly faced with challenges. We get into debt because we believe the wiliness of the persuaders. We succumb to addictions because we believe that they are life-enhancing.

Poor choices are a fact of life for most of us at one time or another. It's easy to be wise in hindsight. But again for most of us such experiences are necessary for us to mature.

Jesus testing story is around his vocation. We are told that Jesus begins to discern his future ministry under the guidance of the Spirit. For major decisions it is important to use the help, not only of God in prayer, but also the resources that are available in our communities. These also are gifts of God.

Matthew uses a classic pattern to hold Jesus' story. Jesus will become a Light to the Nations, a teacher and healer, so it is fitting that he undergo an examination of his values and character.

The testing is three-fold. The first is about using power to satisfy his own physical needs. The second is about using his relationship with God for his own glory. The final testing is about usurping the place of God. Leadership in the church and discipleship are open to these temptations. We can opt for a life of comfort or we can look to the needs of others. We can attempt to manipulate God in prayer and if our ministry appears successful its easy to begin to believe that it is the result of our own talent.

Jesus meets the challenges by going back to the scriptures. We too, are to learn to know our scriptures as an aid to discernment.

Patricia Stevenson rsj.