

Sunday 21 October 2012

Readings: Job 38: 1-7; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:32-45

Do you know what it feels like to be lost? I suspect most of us do.

You might have been trying to find an unfamiliar address and suddenly you are beyond the map, unsure which way to turn;

or you were heading off through familiar territory and then realise that it is familiar no longer and you don't actually know where you are.

I haven't had much experience with GPS, but I've always liked the story of the English tourists who set off to go from Kaikoura to Hanmer, and found themselves traveling through the Molesworth.

My experiences of lostness have all been urban, so I can only imagine what it might be like to be out in the wild, maybe up in the mountains, and realising that you are lost. Some of you have probably experienced that.

And then there are the childhood memories of being lost, which may be the most powerful – being in a crowd of people and suddenly discovering that you are alone, no familiar faces, no sign of the people you were meant to be with..

One of the highlights of General Assembly for me was the series of four talks entitled “Engaging the Imagination” given by Tim Keel, an American who founded a church in Missouri called Jacob's Well, and who has lectured for a couple of years in Auckland.

He talked about the way we experience lostness, not just geographical lostness (I don't know where I am) but our behavioural response to the situation of being lost.

When people realise they are lost, they begin to panic, and feel an urge to act, to do something, anything, quickly, to get back to where they think they should be. When that doesn't work, because they are not where they think they are, they become disorientated, which produces irrational behaviour, and exhaustion. In the end they resign themselves to their lostness – and then one of two things happens: they give up and die; or they begin to re-draw the map, to learn how to orientate themselves in the new reality in which they find themselves.

Like Robinson Crusoe, they learn how to live in a new situation, they learn new ways of doing things,

and they become in a sense new people.

Tim talked about the wilderness experiences that we have, which often come with that feeling of lostness, because in the wilderness the certainties and securities we have relied on are taken away. In the wilderness the old maps no longer apply – the old stories that we tell about who we are and where we are don't describe the reality of what is actually now. The wilderness is a bewildering place.

“Wilder” is an old English word which means 'to lead or drive astray'. And Tim suggested that often God has acted as a wilder, one who leads or drives people astray, out from the places that are familiar and settled and secure, into wilderness places where we can only survive by re-mapping, by learning new ways of living and acting.

Isn't that what Job had experienced? Job had lost everything that he had counted on, everything that had been important in his life. In his attempts to make sense of what had happened to him, he demanded answers from God. His friends had plenty of answers of their own, all of which Job dismissed.

But both Job and his friends were operating from within the maps, the stories they had been used to, stories which described a reality where God orders the world in such a way that everyone receives reward or punishment according to their behaviour.

And then God speaks out of the whirlwind, and the avalanche of questions sweeps away all the landmarks, all the certainties that Job had been relying on. The reality of God, and the reality of God's relationship with all that is, the whole created order, is so immense, so vast, so complex, so

mind-blowing, there is nothing left of Job's questions.
(And we only read a few of the questions - there are sixty of them in all.)

In our search for certainty and security within the reality we think we know, we generally prefer answers to questions. We want to believe that every question has an answer, a correct answer. We like to think that all problems can be solved, all difficulties can be worked through, if we just follow proper procedure. We especially like it if the answers and the solutions are ones we already know – when we did this and this and this, the result was that, so let's do it again. But Job reminds us that God is a bewildering God, who seems to be far more interested in questions than in answers.

Jesus seldom gave a straight answer to questions that were put to him. Often his response was to ask another question, or to tell a story. Was it because he knew that so often our questions are asked from within the fixed framework of our perception of reality. And that is often an inadequate and inaccurate description of the reality that we are actually in. When we are lost, when we are no longer in the place we knew, we need to re-map, to re-imagine, to re-frame the map or picture or story we are working from to describe the reality of where we are.

Was that what was going on with the disciples? For the third time Jesus had talked openly about what was facing him – 'the Son of Man will be handed over, condemned to death; mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed, and after three days he will rise again.' Each time Jesus tells the disciples this, each time Jesus gives them a road map of where they are going and what is happening, the disciples take off in another direction. They don't get it. Is it that they won't get it, or that they can't get it? They don't want to know about this new and different reality – and so it is on this third occasion when James and John come to Jesus asking for some certainty about the future, but a future they can only envisage on their own terms. “Grant us to sit, one on your left, one on your right”.

Jesus knows the map they are reading from, the story that they are sticking to. It's the way of the world -

“Among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them”.

That's the world we know – where success and power are clearly defined, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, where status depends on who you know and what you can get them to do for you. This is the world the church has operated in for centuries, at least for much of the time since 4th century when Constantine converted. This used to be the world where politicians listened to what the church said, and civic events always included a service of worship in whichever church had the nod, and some churches were known to be the places where the influential people were found on Sundays, and business leaders were often invited on to Session.

But Jesus has a different map. Jesus is telling a different story – “it is not so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant – whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all.”

Jesus was leading them, driving them out into a wilderness, a place they couldn't recognise. This talk of suffering and dying, of servanthood and slavery, was not what they were looking for – but it was the place where Jesus was going. Would they go with him? Would they follow him?

Jesus' first call was to 'repent' – that means 'change your mind' – change the way you see things – change the story you live by – turn around and go in a different direction. Following Jesus was

never meant to look like following the way of the world around us. We follow one who offered up “prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, who learned obedience through what he suffered.”

We are struggling to find our way in new and uncharted territory. The present doesn't look like the past, and the future can feel unimaginable. The stories we have lived by, the maps we have followed, no longer fit the reality of where we find ourselves. It is easy, it is natural, to feel panic and fear and to want to 'do something' to get back to where we used to be, back to where we knew where we were.

But God is a wilder God, one who often leads, calls, drives the people of God into the wilderness, and that's where they discover God afresh.

Tim Keel said that too often we think of God's grace as something warm and gentle, in rather sentimental terms. But grace is not like that – grace is fierce and relentless and disruptive, turning our world upside down. Grace comes from outside the system to change the system, to change our perception of reality, to change our story, our map.

Tim posed some questions:

What's coming at me from outside right now?

What's disrupting my life?

What's making me angry?

Could it possibly be the grace of God deconstructing the false reality in which I am living– and inviting me into a new reality, a new story, a new direction, one that so far I have not even begun to imagine?