

Sunday 17 February 2013 – First Sunday in Lent

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

We are now in the season of Lent – until Easter I get to wear this wonderful woven preaching scarf. Although it is not in the traditional colour for the season - purple - its earthy tones, reminiscent of soil and ashes, seem to me to be very appropriate for a season which begins on Ash Wednesday with the words: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”

Lent provides a period, (forty days (not counting the Sundays) for reflection and self-examination, time to prepare for Easter. And we begin the season today listening to Scripture passages that address the question of our identity - “Who am I?”

How do you respond to the question “Who am I?” There are so many different ways you can answer that question.

Take a moment now to think about how you might respond if someone asks you “Who are you?”.....

And now if you would, please turn to the person beside you, or in front of you or behind you, and share with them two or three things you could say as an answer to that question – “who am I?”

(and if you don't know the name of the person make sure you share that information first)

.....

So, I wonder how you answered the question “ Who am I?”.

I expect that some of the answers spoke of what you do or did – I'm a teacher, I'm an electrician, I'm a student.

Many of the answers probably spoke of relationships, particularly family relationships – I'm a son or daughter, a wife or husband, a mother or father. But also I'm so-and-so's friend.

Another group of responses were probably based around groups or communities we belong to – I live in Dunedin, I'm a member of First Church

And some answers would say something about our history and heritage, where we have come from – I'm a NZer, Australian, American, Samoan, Korean...

I wonder if some of you included (perhaps because I asked you this within the context of worship) - I'm a Christian – I belong to God – I follow Jesus?

So many different ways to answer “Who am I?”

The reading from Deuteronomy comes at the end of a large section in the book of Deuteronomy which is written as Moses' farewell speech to the people of Israel before his death, and before they enter the Promised Land.

After their slavery in Egypt, after their 40 years of desert wanderings, now they are poised to enter into the land of promise. And these verses we read today speak of the way they were to recall and retain their identity as

God's people

when they settled in the land, the land which God was giving to them.

Year by year, they were to bring the firstfruits of their harvest, bring them in gratitude and in worship, bring them first to God and then bring them to share with those who lived with them, both insiders and outsiders.

And year by year they were to look back and remember where they had come from and how they had got to this place, so that they would not forget who they were and whose they were.

“My ancestor was a wandering Aramean”¹

(And the word for wandering speaks not of an idle stroll, but can mean 'perishing' – wandering in the desert is a dangerous business, and there was no guarantee that this wandering Aramean wouldn't end up as bleached bones).

My ancestor was a nothing person, a homeless alien, except for what Yahweh, the Lord, has done – through highs and lows, through population growth and slavery, it was God alone, with mighty hand and outstretched arm, who had brought them to this place of security, of prosperity, of belonging.

Year by year the people were to recall who they were and whose they were, people who had been nothing, who had been brought up out of Egypt, who had been given a land to possess, who had gathered the harvest of that land.

All because of what God had done – Yahweh heard, saw, brought us out, with mighty hand and outstretched arm, a terrifying display of power, with signs and wonder².

Who they were and what they were depended on God, and their only appropriate response to all the God had done for them was to bring their thanks, to bring their worship, to remind themselves again that all they had and all they were was gift from God.

How do we remember where we have come from and how God has been with us?

How do we express our gratitude to God for all God's goodness to us?

How do we live our lives now in ways that acknowledges that all our life is gift?

This season of Lent, seven weeks of reflection and preparation, is an invitation to consider those questions – who are

1 Deuteronomy 26:5

2 Deuteronomy 26:8

we, and whose are we? And how then shall we live?

In the gospel reading we find Jesus in the wilderness, wandering in the desert for 40 days. And facing the same question that Israel faced – who am I, and how then shall I live?

It's about a month since we read the account of Jesus' baptism, and heard the voice that declared to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased"³. But in Luke's gospel, that's just one chapter back, and the verses between are Luke's account of Jesus' genealogy, which ends with "son of Adam, son of God". It would seem that in Jesus' case the answer to the question "Who are you?" has already been given, very clearly.

But what does that mean? How will Jesus live out his identity as the Beloved, son of Adam, son of God?

The devil offers some ever-so-helpful suggestions. Although our translations say "If you are the son of God", the meaning is closer to "Since you are the Son of God." What does that mean? What are you going to do about it?

Will you feed the hungry? Moses fed the people when they were starving in the desert – won't God do the same through you?

Will you rule the world with justice? Rome with the might of its economic, administrative and military empire ruled the known world and held sway over all, just as in ancient Egypt the people suffered under the Pharaoh's oppression. Moses led the people to freedom – what a good job you would do of bringing freedom if all glory and authority was yours. Why not rule with justice now?

Will you demonstrate that you are righteous, make it clear that God is on your side? God had promised to uphold and protect the righteous, and the Temple was the place where righteous people should be found. But many of the 'professionally' righteous people in Jesus' day, the religious elites centred in Jerusalem, were working hand in glove with the Roman occupiers, adding to the suffering and oppression of Israel's poor. Why not show them up for who they are and demonstrate God's choice of you, for the sake of the people?

No, but Yes, is Jesus' answer.

His immediate answer is a resounding No – because that is not the Father's desire for him, that is not the path that God has set before him. The Son of God is not here to grab power for himself, or to show off how much he matters to God, or to work magic for the masses. That's not how it's going to work.

His No is backed up with Scripture – One does not live by bread alone; Worship the Lord your God and serve only God; Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

No, but Yes

– because as Jesus lives out his identity as Son of God throughout his life, he responds to each of the devil's tests. As he gets on with his ministry, as he lives the life of God made flesh, he does feed the hungry, producing abundance from five loaves and two fish.

Through his preaching and teaching, he proclaims God's reign of justice and peace, and inaugurates that reign not through coercion and violence but through the power of love.

When he does finally go to Temple in Jerusalem, he is ready to trust God utterly with his life, even as he goes to the cross. And God demonstrates once and for all the truth of Jesus' identity when he is raised from the dead.

Who am I? The question is ours to live with through Lent. It is a question that has been answered in our baptism - I am a child of God, I am beloved. But how then shall I live?

Many choose to practise a Lenten discipline through these weeks, not to make them holier or better (nor even fitter and lighter), but as a way of helping them focus more intentionally on their relationship with God.

What suggestions do today's readings offer us of practices we might adopt this Lent?

What about gratitude – paying attention to the things we are grateful for, and taking time each day or each week to name them.

What about remembering – tracing the ways that God has led us through our life. recalling God's provision for us, and acknowledging our dependence on God

What about Bible reading and prayer – to help us shape our lives and our habits and our attitudes according to God's priorities, to reframe our story within God's story..

First Church Youth are going to bring us a song now – *On Eagle's Wings*.

As you listen to the singing, take this time to consider how you might draw closer to God through the season of Lent, knowing that you belong to God, that your identity is as a child of God, and that you live your life out of that identity.

*Here I am waiting, abide in me, I pray
Here I am longing for You
Hide me in Your love, bring me to my knees -
May I know Jesus more and more
Come live in me all my life, take over
Come breathe in me, I will rise on eagle's wings⁴*