

5th Sunday of Lent – 21 March 2010

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

A few weeks ago, at the start of Lent, we might recall that the gospel reading for that day recounted (very briefly) Jesus's 40-day time of testing in the wilderness.

On that 1st Sunday of Lent, we were only just setting out on our journey through the wilderness; but now we've reached the fifth Sunday – we're now just over half-way through Lent and we've been 'in the desert' for something like 29 days – or 33 if we started our counting on Ash Wednesday.

So maybe at this stage our enthusiasm for the task is beginning to flag. It's interesting to note that last Sunday, roughly the half-way mark, as well as being Mothering Sunday, is also known as Refreshment Sunday, by way of giving us some kind of relaxation in our penitential observances; it's a sort of break in the midst of our time of self-discipline. But it's at this point, when the going gets tough, that we should ask ourselves, what is it that's motivating us to go on with this time of testing? What is it that keeps us going?

We might well ask, in fact, what it is that enables us to endure anything: why does an athlete keep on pounding away on the track or in the gym? Why does a musician keep on practising endless scales or arpeggios? Why does a writer slog on day after day, even when inspiration is not always forthcoming? Ultimately, it's because there's a goal to be aimed for: it might be the gold medal in the Olympics; or the prize of being a virtuoso performer on stage; or perhaps it's the prospect of penning a bestselling novel. Always, there needs to be something ahead to draw us on.

In Jesus's case, what kept him going through his time in the desert – and indeed, throughout his whole earthly ministry – was that he had a clear sense of his mission, and what, ultimately, lay beyond it. He had a sense of purpose and that is always a strong incentive to go on with anything. Of course, Jesus's role was a multi-faceted one: he came to teach us how to live godly lives within the constraints of the human condition; he came to be the once-for-all sacrifice that would atone for the sins of the whole of humankind; and he came to show that death does not have the last word. At any given moment, though, Jesus would have understood that his mission was to do his Father's will. He longed to complete the task he'd been given, so that he could return to the glorious presence of the Father.

So it's this need for a clear goal, a prize, an incentive that we need to think about if we're going to be able to endure in the desert. Our O.T. and Epistle readings should provide some help here and spur us on.

In the O.T. reading, God (through the prophet Isaiah) reminds the Israelites of the Exodus, the mighty act of salvation that God performed, leading them through the sea, while their enemy, the Egyptians, perished. But then God says something that seems contradictory; he tells them *not* to remember the former things. What's going on here? Well, at the time Isaiah was proclaiming this message, God's chosen people were about to be exiled in Babylon, where they would come to believe that the best was behind them; consequently, past tradition would be connected with the loss of a golden age.

So when God tells them not to remember the former things, what he is really saying is not to brood over that past tradition, things in the distant past. What they must focus on is the immediate future when the events of the Exodus will be replicated in even more glorious fashion in the restoration of Israel. The distant past events will pale into insignificance in the face of the 'new thing'. God's power to deliver will once again be made manifest. There *is* hope, there is an incentive to go on; and to underline that, the outcome of this 'new thing' is declared. ("I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ... for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.") Just the sort of thing I imagine you would want to hear when you feel you are in the middle of a wilderness or in exile, with nothing but desolation stretching between yourself and the horizon.

If we look now to the N.T. reading, we see that God has once again done a 'new thing'. The epistle to the Philippians echoes the O.T. reading in this respect, in that it highlights the contrast between the 'former things', i.e., the old way of salvation, and a radically new way of salvation.

With the opening paragraph of our epistle reading, however, we need to be careful, for we might very easily get the impression that Paul's boasting is simply that of an arrogant egomaniac. We need to understand why Paul is boasting the way he does. The section chosen from the third chapter of Philippians for our epistle reading omits the two immediately preceding verses which give the reason for Paul's boasting.

Last week – or maybe it was the week before – Kirstin mentioned the Judaisers. They were Jewish Christians who believed, among other things, that certain O.T. ceremonial practices were still binding on the N.T. church. They appeared to be saying, yes, follow Christ... but you need to observe this and that aspect of Jewish practice *as well*. These Judaisers wouldn't accept that the sacrifice that Christ had made on the cross was all-sufficient; they couldn't see that our salvation no longer depended on the former patterns of piety. They were, in fact, missing the whole point of the gospel!

Paul, therefore, in boasting of his impeccable Jewish credentials has a point to make. He is trying to show the contrast between the old way of Jewish sacrificial practices and the new way of Christ.

What he is saying in effect is this: Look, if you think I'm advocating this new way (the righteousness that comes through Christ) simply because I was never able to meet the requirements of the old way, then you're wrong – *well* wrong, as we might say today. Whatever your qualifications, I can match them – in fact, if you want to make these qualifications of the flesh the basis of your argument against me, then I can outdo you all. You can almost hear Paul say: You want a contest on the basis of following Jewish practice? OK, bring it on!

Let's look at the way Paul puts forward his argument for the 'new thing', this new way of salvation. Paul starts by saying:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.

He then lists his Jewish credentials to show that he can outdo them easily on that score – a whole list of things that show that he meets every requirement they might insist on. Then, having demolished that aspect of their argument, he goes on to the 'new thing':

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

That little word, 'yet' alerts us to the fact that, despite Paul's impeccable Jewish pedigree, there is something to come that's going to make everything that's gone before, redundant. That whole list of qualifications means nothing when seen in the light of Christ. Why, then, should everything else be regarded as loss because of Christ? Because by gaining Christ and being found in him, Paul possesses a righteousness, not of his own, but one that comes through faith in Christ. And we, too, can possess that righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

But what do we mean by possessing a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ? Perhaps I can best illustrate it by citing the examples of Martin Luther and John Wesley. Both Luther and Wesley, before they 'saw the light', were a bit like our Judaisers. Despite describing themselves as believers in Christ, they both felt that it was only by certain penitential or pietistic actions that they would be considered righteous in God's sight. Wesley founded his Holy Club with its strict, pious ethos; while Luther engaged in some extraordinary acts of self-abasement, both of them hoping to make themselves worthy to stand before God. But in striving to make themselves holy by their own efforts, they were denying the efficacy of Christ's atoning death on the cross!

Possessing a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ means simply this: believing in our hearts that Christ's death on the cross really has atoned for all the sins of humankind, past, present and future. It is trusting that Christ has done the work of reconciling sinful mankind with God and recognising that there is nothing that we can add to that once-for-all sacrifice. That's what 'righteousness that comes through faith in Christ' means.

But if an elaborate system of sacrificial rites that was incumbent on God's people under the *old* covenant is no longer necessary, surely an appropriate response of some kind is called for under the new covenant?

Indeed, Paul acknowledges that he can't just sit back and take it easy, for he says '*Not that I have already obtained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own...*' Paul therefore, qualifies his remarks by telling how his life as a Christian is a dynamic, ongoing challenge. Good works from now on are evidence of *faith*, *not* the means whereby we put ourselves right with God. Armed with this new hope, he presses on towards the goal. In the same spirit, we should be spurred on in our preparation for Easter.

We see the difference between those who understand the significance of the 'new thing' and those who do not, in the response of two of the characters in the gospel reading. Mary, like Paul, recognises the immense value of having a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, and celebrates by breaking open a jar of costly perfume. Judas Iscariot, however, hasn't understood the significance of this 'new thing'; he doesn't 'get it', as we might say – and his response is mean-spirited. So the response of one is joyful and celebratory; the other is cynical, and, as the writer makes clear, blatantly hypocritical too!

So then, let Mary's extravagant gesture of faith in Christ be an encouragement to us as we journey on in hope towards Easter.