

**Lent 5 – Willows Uniting Church**  
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Jesus, returned from the Jordan where he had been baptised, and was led by the Spirit in the Wilderness, where for 40 he was tempted by the Devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The Devil said to him, *'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'* Jesus answered him, *'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."*

Jesus journeys in the Judean Wilderness discerning his sense of call, experiencing temptations, and encountering doubts. Jesus is involved in serious soul searching... seeking to know himself and his willingness to respond to God's call. This Judean Wilderness is a place that calls for great physical endurance: it's a difficult place to endure for a few hours let alone 40 days.

You came here to think, reflect and to be challenged. You came here knowing you'd be tested - and tested to the extreme. How are you going to face these challenges – what do you do with your renewed faith?

Here we are along side Jesus in our Lenten journey.

Our Lenten Journey has been a close walking with Jesus.

It's been an incredible journey over the past 5 weeks: we have covered much ground and our eyes have been opened. We have shared with Jesus in his (and our own) desire for financial comfort... "All this could be yours..." And on the other hand... what will it cost me to follow God's call?

We have considered how we love the Lord our God and how we love those who are our neighbours: those who are historically and traditionally our enemies. "How can I love my enemies Father..."

We have considered our default position: to give or to take, to love or condemn, to judge or forgive, to throw the first stone or offer an outstretched hand?

With Jesus we have committed ourselves to God: Jesus meant it when he said... "Father, your will be done..." and we wonder if we meant it too?

We have considered with Jesus the wars, the violence and the bloodshed in this *holy land* and wondered how any of that ever revealed God's way of love.

We have marveled at the length and breadth, height and depth of God's love for *all people*: for tax collectors outcasts, for Romans and Gentiles, and yes, *even for the Samaritans*. We have had to come to terms with what this means for us, and how we reveal God's love to all.

We have considered how blind the people can be to God... and how some people want to remain in their blindness and have no intention of seeing.

Jesus' spiritual quest (and ours) is proving very worthwhile. Everything is becoming clearer and rather than becoming more tired and exhausted, weak and drained Jesus feels that he is becoming stronger. *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God..."* To do your will Father is my food, he prays.

Our temptations are never far away. They surface often and especially when we feel that things are not going our way.

Again Jesus' temptations come to him, *return home..., see your family..., your poor mum is on her own... she is worried for you... go to her. Give up this waste of time... look how hungry you are... you're wasting away... this is killing you! God doesn't care for you... if you were to fall here he would not catch you, nor would he send his angels to support you... you would cut yourself on these rocks and die from your wounds with no one to help you.*

God is not with you... all you have in this desert is your own voice for comfort. God is not talking to you...

There is so much more that you could do with your life... you could use the skills your father taught you for the great and for the wealthy Romans, and you could eat at their tables... you could really be somebody! God is not here, nothing is here... this place is dead, the sea is dead, and you are dying.

Jesus wonders if he were to call out, would God come? *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the Test..."*

Lord you are with me: you are with me in my heartbeat and in my breath; you are with me in every step and in every moment. You are with me and I praise you.

The people of this land have long prayed for God to come to them. "Lord come to our aid" they have prayed. "Lord come and deliver us from our oppressors" they have prayed many times: when in Egypt, when the Assyrians invaded, when the Babylonians invaded and then again when the Romans invaded and became the occupiers. "Lord come to our aid... Come and deliver us from our oppressors."

Jesus considers the people's cry for help. They are quick to call upon God for help when in trouble, but in the good times they never celebrate God's goodness, never recognize God's presence, and never consider God's call to them. These people seem to want God on *their* terms. They want God to listen to them when they call upon him, but they will not listen to God when he calls upon them.

I have a colleague in the Royal Navy who served in 1990 in what was known as Operation Desert Storm, the war in Iraq. On the way to Iraq Scott held devotions on the ship. These worship services were packed with crew members: in fact the services were so packed that one service was insufficient. Scott had to hold several services and beyond that, he quite literally had to have more bible and prayer book supplies flown in. In biblical language, "a great cry went up from the ship to the Lord, with one voice the people called upon the Lord their God." Interestingly and most significantly, on the way home there was no need for more than one service of worship aboard ship, and even that one service did not see a full chapel.

Jesus reflects upon these people who call upon God. It often reads as though **Moses** called for the seas to part and God responded immediately, or that **Joshua** calls upon God to stop the sun from setting and God responded immediately; or that (2Ki 4: 42-44) **Elijah** called for fire and fire appeared, or that "a man from Baal Shalisha brought some food for the prophet—twenty loaves of bread made from the first fruits of the barley harvest, as well as fresh ears of grain. Elisha said, "Set it before the people so they may eat."<sup>43</sup> But his attendant said, "How can I feed a hundred men with this?" He replied, "Set it before the people so they may eat, for this is what the LORD says, 'They will eat and have some left over.'"<sup>44</sup> So he set it before them; they ate and had some left over, just as the LORD predicted.

What the Bible records often reads like God obeys the call of the people and God obeys them immediately. However, this is not our experience in reality. If it were like this, and as simple as this, life would be very strange indeed. We don't really expect seas to part for the recovery of the black box flight recorder or for a plague to take the life of every first-born ISIS Terrorist. Our faith tells us that God is not an obedient dog, and that sometimes we need to answer our own prayers.

Some might think that God is at their beck and call. (John 11:21) "Lord if you had come immediately when we called upon you none of this would have happened..." Who follows whom in faith? Is your faith about God following your lead; or is your faith about you following God's lead? Who is Lord in your relationship with God?

Jesus notices something that has been washed here from nearby Jericho or perhaps from further afield... from Jerusalem, or from just about anywhere. The wood and nail look like the remains of a cross. Jesus considers the poor soul who hung upon it and his family. The Romans exert a powerful and fearful authority, and they demand compliance, "This is not your way O God... your way is gracious. As God the Almighty your power is revealed in humble service."

To Jesus people should render unto Caesar that which is Caesars and render unto God that which belongs to God. "Father I render unto you that which is yours: I am yours" Jesus prays.

Jesus looks again at the piece of washed up wood and cruel nail, again he considers the poor soul who hung upon it. And he prays, "Father God wherever you lead I will follow."