

Lenten Study 3

Lent is (or can be) a challenging time. It can be a wilderness journey of reflection... soul searching... and God experiencing. So we begin our Lenten Journey

Lent is about honesty in our reflection on life, and faith; in addressing our doubts and fears; about entering into prayerfulness and God seeking; and it's about questioning and renewal. *When was the last time your faith took a major turn or change or you experienced some great new revelation?*

Lent can be a walk with the disciples; with them we observe and listen to Jesus. At the same time this can be a walk with Jesus; with him we share in his temptations, doubts and fears, and we share in his hopes and prayers. This will be a faith journey and we wonder if our faith will sustain us.

During Lent we follow Jesus into the wilderness for some soul searching, we ask some big questions of God, we ask some big questions of ourselves, we reconsider life and the meaning of life, and the meaning of *my life*.

In the wilderness what is important will come sharply into focus and what is insignificant will scurry away.

In the wilderness we will face some uncomfortable truths: perhaps about ourselves; we will face some scary truths – perhaps about our faith;

we will face some new challenges – that may upset us and test us to the limit.

What new things will God say? Are we like those of old who prayed: "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more" (Deut. 18:16).

Prayer... "Loving Father you eternally give to the Son through your Spirit (pause).

Your life is eternally sharing and outpouring your love until cups overflow (pause).

Your life is eternal generous giving; you give without counting the cost (pause).

Your life and eternal movement of loving action, loving words, and loving thoughts (pause).

Your Son reveals your way, showing that it is better to give than to receive?

He reveals that your way is to give even to those who do not understand, and to those who are undeserving, and even to those who reject your gift. And still you give yourself to them (pause). And you want us to follow in your way? Hear our prayers Father for Jesus sake. AMEN."

Read Luke 7: 1-10

Sharing: That reading leads me to ask: "**Who is worthy to receive from God?**" (pause for a moment and think about this).

The Jews they thought of some as being 'righteous' – they belonged to the 'in group'. God would of course favour them. They saw themselves as those who deserved God's blessing. They also saw others as 'undeserving'. Do we think like this as Christians or as a church? *We certainly used to think of those who deserved... e.g. to participate in Holy Communion. Some people 'qualified' and some didn't!*

What on earth is the church for? "For us" - is the church a holy gathering 'a holy huddle'; or is the church "for the world"? (look at Matthew 27: 19). Are we *self-serving* or here to *serve others*?. How we answer these questions will be determined by how

we understand God: and that will determine our nature and essence as a local church, that is, what we are like: inward look or outward looking.

What is the breadth of Jesus' ministry... is it only for the righteous (Luke 5:31)?

Did Jesus' ministry include the unrighteous?

If so, what was the reaction of all others to this: the reaction of temple authority, Pharisees, disciples and his own family to this?

Are the interests and concerns of Jesus' the same as the people he meets?

Do our interests and concerns as Christians and as a church reflect our community or are we detached somehow "on a different page"?

Jesus revealed a great breadth of love and acceptance that shocked and outraged his listeners – this was not their way. Is Jesus' love still just as shocking and outrageous?

Are we broad or narrow in accepting Jesus' breadth of ministry? *And the answer may be simple and not complicated...* "yes we are!" Then again we may want to say "yes" but are we? It's easy for us to accept Jesus' *outreach to lepers* because we don't see them, but... *who are the lepers of our day?* That is, who Jesus is with, entering their homes, and eating with that we would not! Some Christians may be appalled and refuse to enter! Are they missing out? Are we still broad or narrow in accepting Jesus' breadth of ministry?

Where would we be uncomfortable in following Jesus? (Take a moment and be honest). You might not even be able to share this as it is deeply probing. Jesus does confront us as he asks, "are you coming?"

What is the breadth of our North Lake Macquarie Parish ministry and why does our church offer a broad ministry? Does our ministry reflect Jesus' own – is that what we are seeking or are we seeking some other?

The church seeks to follow Jesus' breadth of ministry as she goes into all the world... offering chaplains: to industry, to schools, to hospitals, to universities, to armed forces, to police, to Returned Service League, etc.

The church reaches out to people in Jesus' name through: open air preaching, beach missions (baptizing in a person's home or at the beach!), churches offer soup kitchens, food distributions, op-shops, needle exchange, bible studies in the pub, etc. (see Matthew 25: 35-40). We may wish that praying for people was enough! Some congregations are very innovative in revealing God's generous love in new ways – do you know of any?

Ministers have a unique opportunity and privilege in their work to proclaim the good news through pastoral work, ministry outreach, weddings, funerals, and sacraments. This is a massive privilege where one is invited into another's deepest sorrow or deepest joy. How would you reveal God's love in every situation – no not revealing God's judgment or condemnation or rejection... *how would you reveal love in every situation?*

A Kenneth 'True Story': Some phoned me and asked if I would baptize her grandchild. Before she could say any more I said, "Yes I would be delighted". The lady continued, "My daughter hasn't actually had the baby yet, but I was just checking..." Kenneth replied, "No problem, the answer is still yes. Just get in touch with me when the baby is born."

The gran-to be responded, "There is one other thing, my daughter, though brought up in the Uniting Church no longer attends..."

Kenneth replied, "That's not a problem, God loves the baby in her womb and will love that baby forever... just get in touch when the baby is born"

The gran-to-be is working up to the other problem... "Kenneth, there is one other problem, my son-in-law is an atheist... and..."

Kenneth interrupts the gran-to-be and says, "Listen, there is nothing that you can say that is ever going to dissuade me from baptizing that baby...!" At this the gran-to-be laughs and laughs and finally says, "That's what I was hoping you might say."

I hear you asking..., and yes the baby was born, and yes the baptism did take place, and that whole family came to my induction at North Lake Macquarie – *and brought baby James with them!*

Some questions come out of that true story: Why did Kenneth agree to this baptism, **was it because Kenneth is so nice** (*you can tell it was him that wrote this can't you!!!*) or was it for another reason?

Why did he (*and why does he always*) say "yes" to a baptism before he hears anything about the family concerned?

What does this response tell of God's love does it speak of unconditional, generous, gracious (as the family always feel undeserving), warm, inclusive, accepting, and giving – and even foolish (1 Corinthians 4:10a)?

But what if the family is atheist? The baptism is about God's love, and God's generosity, and God's grace, not about their faith *or lack of it*. God is the focus! If baptism depended upon us being righteous it's not so much about those who wouldn't qualify – that's easy. But who would qualify??? *Doesn't it have to be gracious to the undeserving or no one could be baptized!*

Some may well be upset at Christian outreach (baptism at a beach)? As this isn't the way it used to be. What did it used to be, and what did it used to reveal of God's love?

Can you think of any example of a church going the extra mile for those who especially DO NOT deserve it? Consider their reaction of being "*surprised by grace*".

If Jesus reveals God's breadth and great inclusiveness who do we exclude? There are some that are excluded! To include all was controversial in Jesus' ministry, and is also in the ministry of the church. Some followers of Jesus will find this too hard.

*"When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' Because of this many of his disciples turned back **and no longer went about with him.**"⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6: 60, 66-68).*

Is it too hard for you?

Prayer: "Generous God, ever giving... you give carelessly, you give to the unrighteous and even to the most undeserving. They will never thank you, you know; they will never appreciate what you offer. Yet you do not need their permission to love and forgive them – for this is your way... Help us to walk in your Son's way, guided by your Spirit, for Jesus sake. AMEN."