

Reading: Mark 1:9-15

You have good news for us God.  
Help us to hear it.  
In Jesus name. Amen

When it came time to teach the girls to drive this was a job for dad. Rebecca and I started off okay but after a while she said, "I know you are saying stuff, but I have trained myself so well not to listen to you that I can't make it out. How about you put on a different voice." So I tried a high voice: "Turn left here." And a low voice: "Turn right here." But in the end the voice that worked best was a chanting voice: "Please stop here." "Now I can hear you," she said. I won't tell you what I chanted when she drove into a parked car!

God is always and everywhere speaking to us, but we can over time learn to tune him out. Like Rebecca we know stuff is being said we just can't make out the details.

This week we begin Lent. Lent began as a time of encouraging those about to be baptised at Easter. We not only have numerous baptisms coming up but we also have five young people beginning the journey to confirmation.

But what is God really saying to us? If we could listen what would God say? Often on this day the reading is from Luke 4:1-9 or it's Matthew equivalent. We find Jesus in the desert, the word the tempter uses to try and derail Jesus and his ministry is a very little word. The wee word is 'if'. "If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread." "If you really are the Son of God then throw yourself off the temple." "If you are the Son of God then bow down and worship me." To cast doubt on Jesus true identity this is the way of temptation for him.

For us there are also many voices that cast doubt on our true identity as the children of God. "If God really loved me, he wouldn't allow this to happen to me." "If God was real, I wouldn't be going through this hard time." "If God really listened to prayer then this wouldn't be happening." "If you are loved by God then ..."

The voice of the tempter is discouraging, but listen to the voice of God in today's reading. Verse 11, "and a voice came from heaven and said, "You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased." Notice how very positive this is. Not if but you **are**.

What God said to Jesus God is saying to each of us today. "You are my beloved child. You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son."

That old fashioned word beloved is very interesting. You can break it down - Be loved. Be loved by God. To be loved by God is the task of Lent. To listen to the voice of God saying you are loved and cherished and valued, rather than the multitude of voices that say "if."

We so often focus on the negative. According to an interview I heard on national radio this is an evolutionary throwback. When we lived in caves, ate raw meat and hunted with our bare hands (much like the people of Ashburton still do today) we needed to be able to think negatively. As we sat around our fire with our little family, "Yes, I'm enjoying this right now but soon it might rain," so this would motivate us to go and look for dry firewood. The problem is we have got so good at this negative way of thinking that in modern life, when

the likelihood of a sabre tooth tiger eating us is much less. We need to practice positive thoughts otherwise we can give in to fear, anxiety and negativity. Even churches can get into this negative fog. Even Christians can get into a downward spin.

I want to give you some homework for Lent. Think of a negative phrase or thought you have in your head.

Practice turning it upside down and make it an affirmation of your God given value.

For example where you might say "I am worthless"... rather say... "I am precious, I am honoured, I am beloved of God."

Where you might say "I am unlovable"... say ... "I am infinitely loved by God."

Where you might say "I don't have enough" ... say "I have everything I need In God."

Where you might say "I am stupid" ... say ... "I have the mind of Christ."

Why not repeat these positive statements aloud, slowly, with intention and with trust, several times. Then rest silently in the awareness that you are already and forever, without any effort or achievement on your part, a beloved child of God.

The real "work" of prayer, the real work of Lent is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. Henri Nouwen writes: "To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear the voice of blessing-- that demands real effort."

Lent isn't about giving things up, though if those things stand in the way of us hearing the voice of God, then give them up by all means.

What difference does hearing you are loved make anyway?

I heard of young man going to his 21st. Samuel was really nervous. He didn't want a 21<sup>st</sup>. He thought the idea of his friends meeting his parents wouldn't work out well. He thought he would just get drunk and hope the whole thing would be over quickly. Sam's family had the tradition of the dad giving a speech. Usually pretty lame he thought to himself.

"I want you to know how much mum and I love you. We love you unconditionally. It doesn't matter to us if you grow up to be rich or poor, if you succeed or don't succeed, if you have a wonderful job or no job at all, if you make mistakes or not. We do, and always will, love you."

Samuel recounted later that hearing his father's speech was like having a weight taken from him. He had never heard before that his parents loved him unconditionally. He thought he needed to earn their love. That night something changed inside him, a light went on. He felt truly loved.

This is the Lenten journey in a nutshell, to listen to the loving voice of God. Like Rebecca listening to my voice, you may have learned to shut it out. Let's fast from listening to the other voices that want to judge and put down and cast doubt, let's instead hear that voice that proclaims us as the beloved of God.