

Keeping Focus

6 March 2021

Lent 1

Reading: Luke 4:1-13

They call them focus groups. These panels of carefully chosen people represent different sections of society and they are brought together to give feedback. It might be new washing powder, or a political party. I must have one of those faces, or maybe one of those phone numbers, but I'm always being rung up by research groups. I try and answer if I can, because I used to work for Heylen Research and know how difficult it is to get people to answer. This particular night I was rung by a beer marketing company. "Can we interview you about your beer drinking habits?" "Sure," I said, "but I don't drink much." "That's okay," they said. At the conclusion they asked would you like to be a member of a beer focus group? A taxi will call for you, take you to town, where you will drink lots of different beers give your feedback and then we feed you. I knew it would be a struggle but in the interests of science I was prepared to give it a go. I'm still waiting.

It's all too easy to lose focus. Today continues the season we call Lent. It's a season when we refocus. We follow the example of Jesus who spent forty days in the wilderness. During this time Jesus is tempted to lose his focus. Jesus is tempted to lose focus in three ways. He is tempted by food. Who wouldn't be on a forty day fast? He is tempted by power. All the kingdoms of the world are offered to him. And he is tempted to lose focus by popularity or success, by leaping off the temple and being saved at the last minute - a sort of divine bungy jump.

Jesus keeps on task by reminding himself and the devil of who he is, using Scripture to do it. But notice the doubt that Satan puts in his mind, "If you are the Son of God..."

Being a child of God does not make us immune to temptation. When we are losing focus it's easy to forget that we live in a world of powers and principalities; we can find ourselves driven away from our focus and overwhelmed by anger, or resentment, or lust, or greed. We all know examples of people who have lost focus. (Although we find it hardest to see it in our own lives.)

Cyclist Lance Armstrong demonstrated to the world how when the goal becomes winning at all costs, then everything else falls victim. By his own admission, he sacrificed truth, friendship, conscience, integrity, and reputation to the ultimate god of winning. A friend of mine, a Christian, became a very good runner. She was competing on a national level. She caught herself one day looking at the insoles of the other runners in the changing room to see how they wore the shoe. The pattern of wear could demonstrate what their weakness was. She realised winning was starting to be at all costs. She still runs, but she does it for pleasure.

We need to protect, support, and help each other stay close to the heart of God. Those with faith are a minority in our world, a world that wants us to believe God is just a swear

word, prayer a fantasy, holiness a dream and eternal life just wishful thinking. A world where secondary is served up as the main course.

Early Jewish hearers of the gospel would have connected the forty days of Jesus's retreat with the forty days that Elijah wandered hungry in the wilderness, the forty days, and nights that Moses fasted before etching the Ten Commandments, and the forty years that the former Egyptian slaves wandered in the desert before reaching the Promised Land.

Greek hearers would have connected the three temptations with their threefold categories of vice: the love of pleasure, the love of possessions, and the love of glory.

And it is a tradition in Christianity that Jesus lay dead in his tomb for forty hours before he was resurrected on Easter.

By staying close to the heart of God, and remembering who he is, Jesus is able to endure his time of testing.

What testing, what time of trial do you face in your life? Lent calls us back again to the heart of God, to remember we are the children of God. Loved, held, cherished by God we need not fear any time of testing.

Family, advancement in our careers, paying the mortgage, our health, our garden, all of these are great and good things, but they aren't God. Only God is God. We can see the shortfall in Lance Armstrong's life; but can we see it in our own?

Lent calls us 'forgotteners' to become remembers.

You may remember the story of Helen of Troy. According to legend this beautiful queen was captured and carried away and became a victim of amnesia. She became a prostitute and not remembering her name, or her royal blood wandered from street to street.

Back in her homeland an old friend never gave up hope that she was still alive. He determined to find her. He went to the enemy land and searched high and low. One day he saw a tattered woman with deep lines across her face. There was something about her that seemed familiar, so he went up to her, "What is your name?" he asked. What she said made no sense, so he asked to see her hands. She held them out. Then the old friend knew, this was Helen. "You are Helen," he said. "You are Helen." She looked up astonished, the fog began to clear, "I am Helen." she said. Discovering her lost self, she put her arms around her friend who carried her home where she became the queen she was born to be.

We too are wandering in land that is not our own. We have forgotten who we are until one day an old friend comes, and he shows us his hands. They are pierced hands. It is then that he utters our name, a name we have long forgotten, "Child of God." Then we remember, "I am a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, I am of a royal priesthood, I have been chosen and named and called."

And the wounded one carries us home rejoicing.

In Lent God becomes again the ultimate focus for our lives. When God becomes the focus of our lives, then everything else takes its rightful place, and the joy we receive from other things is even more because our lives have their right focus.

The good news is that once we take hold of who we really are, then we need not fear any testing, or temptation to lose our focus.