

Lent 1

26 February 2023

## Resisting the Temptations that Stop Us Knowing We are Beloved of God

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

It is interesting the questions people ask you at parties. Near the top of the list is what do you do? I was at a party and the inevitable question came up. What do you do? I'm not embarrassed by what I do, far from it, but I do find once people find out what I do, they either start planning their funeral with me or haranguing me about the Cathedral in the Square.

This particular party I was determined to have a good time. So rather than just tell people what I do for a crust I said, "Guess." "Well you're obviously not a bodybuilder," one said. That cut pretty deep. "You don't look intelligent enough to be an accountant," said another. Yet another, "You seem articulate you're probably a journalist." So that's what the group settled on. When I told them the truth, it was back to the corner to be harangued about the Cathedral.

The good news of today's Gospel is that we are so much more than what we do, we are so much more than what other people think of us and we are so much more than what we own.

Let me explain.

Following his baptism Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, into the desert. There the tempter comes to him. The first temptation makes perfect sense, after forty days of no food, the devil says, "If you are the Son of God command these stones to turn into bread." The second temptation is a sort of bungy jump off the temple. "If you are the Son of God throw yourself off the temple, and God's angels will rescue you." For the last temptation the devil takes Jesus to a high tower overlooking all the kingdoms of the world and tries to get Jesus to worship him.

Henri Nouwen, a great writer and Christian teacher, lines up Jesus three temptations with what he calls the three great lies: I am what I do. I am what I have. I am what others think of me.

We are so much more than what we do, each one of us is a child of God, loved and cherished and held. We are so much more than what we own, we are the beloved of God. We are so much more than what others think of us.

Mark and Carol know the power of these lies over their lives. Married with three children, life should have been good, but it wasn't. The lie, 'I am what I own' had taken hold of their lives. Debt was crushing them, and they could see no way out. With creditors chasing them daily, they reached a point where they couldn't even pay the rent. Faced with nowhere to live, hope seemed to have gone. Carol left Mark and Mark despaired even of life itself.

At this low low point Mark was invited by a workmate to hear a message of hope at a nearby church. As he reached out to a God he couldn't see, he did experience a peace and warmth he couldn't explain. He felt hope again for the first time in a very long time.

At that time Carol connected with an organization called Christians Against Poverty where a debt coach offered to help her and Mark rid themselves of their crippling debt. Together they were invited to join a church programme. The message of the programme was, 'You are more than you own'. You don't need to have lots of stuff to be loved by God.

Today, two years later, Mark and Carol not only feel free but are also debt free! Their marriage is back and stronger, Mark has an enjoyable job and Carol, well you might have guessed it, she has become a debt coach helping others to overcome their financial problems too.

The journey of Lent which you and I are on is a journey to discover for ourselves that message spoken to Jesus. "You are the beloved of God." This is the central truth that sustained Jesus in the desert, but also through his whole life and ministry.

We know the story well: people will say well of him but they also will reject him, people will shout *hosanna* but they will also shout *crucify*. It is the knowledge that he is the beloved of that God will carry him through all of it.

In our lives we can live on a kind of roller coaster ride of the emotions depending on whether people speak well of us or bad of us, or, we can rest in the knowledge that God loves us. We can live the lie we are what we own. (Look at those poor people in the North Island - one moment they have everything, the next moment they have nothing.) Or we can live the truth that we are loved of God, regardless of what we have or don't have. Long before we were born God said of each one of us, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have marked you on the palm of my hand."

We don't need to rely on others to give us praise or we don't need to find this or that job to make us happy, we don't even need to find wealth. Rather we can grow more and more secure in the truth of God's love for us.

If you doubt for the truth of God's love for you. Gaze a while on the Cross of Christ.

I heard the story of three young lads. They thought it would be a dag to make up the most horrendous stories of misdeeds and go and confess it to the vicar, after all they thought, he has to forgive them, he's a priest. So, the vicar sat in the church and duly listened to each story one boy after the other. Each boy was given the same penitence. Go and stand in front of the cross and say these words, "I don't give a damn what you have done for me." The first two boys did it no trouble. It's only a bit of wood after all. The last boy, he couldn't find it is his heart to say to the cross, "I don't give damn what you done for me." Today you will find that boy going about his job of being an archbishop.