

Lent 1, 18 February 2024, Year B:

Mark 1.9-15, 1 Peter 3.18-22, Genesis 9.8-17, Psalm 25.1-10

A funny thing happened here on Wednesday. Some 70 persons kept St Valentine's Day by keeping a date with God by attending one of the Ash Wednesday services and therewith committing themselves to a keeping of Lent, which is another way of saying they committed themselves to a 46-day long walk with God, which will lead them into Lent onto Passion and Palm Sunday, through Holy Week via Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and on to Easter Day. By any stretch of the imagination that is an unusual and rather long date to keep. No room for speed dating here.

Last Sunday our focus was directed to a voice that came out of a cloud that overshadowed three of Jesus' disciples at the Transfiguration. (Mark 8.14-21) This cloud that overshadowed them points to the cloud that accompanied the people of Israel in the wilderness, symbolising God's presence with them, and this same cloud of the wilderness makes an appearance at the Transfiguration that will unfold through Jesus' keeping of the Way of the Cross. The Way of the Cross is filled with the Presence of God. This is what we believe. This is what we are called to see. The disciples were Peter, James and John. And the voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Today our focus is directed towards a voice that speaks from heaven rather than from a cloud, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We have gone back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry as told by Mark, because this Sunday being the first Sunday of Lent is about Jesus' humanity as witnessed to by the reality of the temptations Jesus is subjected to, which Mark tersely acknowledges by writing, "He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by

Satan.” Satan being the master of confusion. We miss the dialogue initiated by the master of confusion as recounted by Matthew (4.1-11):

- **‘If you are the Son of God**, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’
- **‘If you are the Son of God**, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”
- And he [the master of confusion] said to him, ‘All these [the kingdoms of the world] I will give you, **if you will fall down and worship me.**’ (Matthew)

Jesus will have none of it, but these temptations are from Matthew’s account. We must therefore take a different approach. And we will do so by observing both voices one from the cloud and the other from heaven, as they are one and the same voice. Each is the voice of God. Today’s voice is the voice of God who is the creator of all things, the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, symbolised by the heavens being ripped open never to be closed again. Last Sunday’s voice, the voice from the cloud, is the same divine voice but now specifically in relationship to the Hebrew people. On each occasion from the cloud and from heaven God through Mark’s account is telling us something about Jesus.

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry God speaks to assure Jesus and those who are reading Mark’s account that Jesus stands in a close even intimate relationship to God as that of a child to a parent that of a Son to a Father. In both cases Jesus is named the beloved. Allow me to sound the word beloved in Greek **agapEtos** and again **agapEtos**. I am sure you could make out the word **agape**? I will give it another go **agapEtos**. Can you hear it? **Agape**.

I don't want to be too technical, but in Greek there are different words for different types of love, which contrast with agape. Agape is both unconditional and sacrificial love. Two other forms of love are eros from which we get erotic and philia which describes brotherly love, the love siblings are to have for one another. Eros is physical and it is therefore relational involving flesh touching flesh. It is intimate. And there is philia which describes a close relationship of persons. Eros is a love we need to order well for our well-being and especially for the well-being of the person we interact with physically, but also for the wider community. Handle with care. Fragile. Contains glass.

Philia is a relationship which binds one person to another person through the quality of the relationship. Once you enter into a relationship of philia you are committed to that person regardless of what will befall you both, like blood brothers/sisters, but it too requires attention and nurture and ordering. There is natural philia and there is a philia of persons who choose each other. These too need ordering also for the sake of the community.

If we have sisters and brothers, we are bound to them whether we like it or not for life. Best to get onto a good footing right away. The fifth commandment, the one with a promise attached to it, respect your father and mother that your days may may be long in the land (Exodus 20.12), stands in relationship to philia, as it too is about familial relationships. The relationships sons and daughters are to have with their parents, which I assert is always to be mutual. The direction of traffic the fifth commandment directs is one-way, but in light of the Christian revelation concerning love it must be mutual. Honour father and mother that your days may be long in life. The paraphrase is mine. But parents and elders in

the Christian dynamic have no seniority, if they are not as loving and caring as the Christian faith calls them to be. This is how it plays.

The voice from heaven after the heavens have been ripped open and the voice from the cloud after Jesus has been transfigured, becoming dazzling white as no bleach on earth could bleach them, both theophanies name Jesus as the Beloved, capital B, **agapEtos**. And as such it is a voice of endearment pointing us forward to the love that makes itself known to us in Jesus' death on the cross for the world and for us, which will in time inspire the Christian understanding of marriage with their accompanying vows. When Jesus is named the Beloved **agapEtos** we are being given to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is also Jesus the Beloved who through his life, a life of self-giving, of self-emptying and sacrificial love manifests the quality/property of God's love. The God who loves us with a perfect love. We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19) Those who have had to accompany their own beloveds, their husbands or wives, their children, their nearest friends, will know that this self-emptying love is demanding. It is not a little. It is a great work calling on our very substance as human beings made in the image of God: emotionally, materially, physically, culturally, spiritually. How does the great Apostle phrase it in one of his letters,

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The word endearment which fell earlier seems important to emphasise as we consider Jesus being named beloved. Jesus' coming amongst us is not simply functional that of being Saviour. What do I mean? There is rightly an emphasis

on Jesus as the one who comes to save. It goes a little like this. What follows is a caricature. So here I am. I have sinned. I have learnt that if I confess my sins God through the work of Jesus, God's reconciling work, God will forgive me my sins. God saves. This is very good to know and to believe. No doubt. However, it always feels to me like a mathematical formula, which theologians will call judicial. There is more. By itself this understanding is not enough. It is obviously transactional. I did something for you, now you do something for me. And no doubt that is one dimension of this saving work. But the naming of Jesus as the Beloved, a term of endearment, points to more. Jesus is more than formula or function or arbiter.

So that this does not become overlong. I am going to direct us to a phrase missing for the most part from the modern liturgies, a phrase from the BCP: "and all other benefits". There is a primacy lodged in our heads. God saves. God forgives. True. This is the judicial, the formulaic, the functional approach. It is essential. The phrase "and all the other benefits we have received at his hands" points, in my mind, to the need to become mature in Christ. One benefit is that we have been given an example to emulate, to mirror, to follow and make our own **AgapEtos**. We are the company of the beloved because he first loved us and gave his life that we might have life, being filled with grace. This means the example we are given is a task each is given to emulate, to mirror, to follow and make our own. Let me put it this way. It is not optional. It sets in motion the call to become mature in Christ.

Finally, I want to recall that the beloved has come for the sake of the world. In the West we need to break out of our isolation as individuals into community locally and globally, learning what this means as the Body of Christ, otherwise

we will, as we can testify abundantly presently, simply proceed to tear ourselves apart and the glory that is given as the foundation through which we become one will fade, because some have not understood what it means to take yourself back out of self-giving, self-emptying love based on The Beloved's love.

The confession that best sums up the communal nature of our common journey as Christians, as those who have drawn close to the Beloved, and especially relevant during this season of Lent acknowledges our need for repentance coupled with our need for forgiveness.

I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own grievous fault; wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. End.