

Lent 1: An open heart

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Read: Psalm 51: 1-17 (note alternative reading of v.17); Luke 4: 1-13

From Psalm 139: *Search me, O God, and know my hearts. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way within me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.*

If you can imagine your way into this scene from the gospel you'll find Jesus, filled with the Spirit, taking time in the wilderness after his baptism. We hear in this story that he was tempted during this time. This was, for him, a time of fasting, which is all about denying yourself food (or something else) for a period of time in order to focus on listening for and trusting God.

But in this time he also heard the devil's voice, which perhaps serves as a good warning to exercise good discernment. The devil even quotes Scripture. Jesus' rejections of the devil's temptations are all about letting God be God and 'staying in his lane' in human living; not testing God or abusing divine power.

Jesus answers the devil with Scriptural quotes. I don't imagine that Jesus had a Bible with him and that when the devil asked a question Jesus skimmed through it to try to find a verse with the answer. Much more likely Jesus was already well versed in the words of the Scriptures and the overarching story of God's redeeming love. Out of Jesus' familiarity with that story he was able to draw from verses about trusting God, about not seeking for power or glory that is rightly God's, and about not testing God either.

This story of Jesus engaging in fasting may prompt some of us to also engage in fasting as a Lenten discipline, in order to focus on listening for and trusting in God. Disciplines of abstaining from something are quite well known for Lent. But you might also get the idea from this that a discipline of daily reading some Scripture – like a Psalm a day, or reading through a gospel – would be another good approach to a spiritual practice for the period of Lent for anyone who isn't in a regular Bible-reading habit. Because after all, what we see in this story is that Jesus' familiarity with the overall story of the Bible - and the many and varied prayers of the Psalms – is all a part of Jesus being able to recognise the temptations and set them aside.

So if you're not regularly reading or listening to the Bible this is something you might consider as a daily discipline for this period of Lent, leading to Easter. With the purpose, as for any Spiritual Discipline, being to listen for God and practice trust - letting go of trying to *be* God and remembering that who you *are* is God's loved child, called to follow in Jesus' way.

In that frame, we have heard today from a number of Psalms about examining our own hearts, and being open for God's examination. Psalm 51 refers to the Psalmist offering their heart in contrition and confession to God, knowing that a contrite heart is welcomed graciously by God, who values honesty and turning toward God far above any other kind of sacrifice. And for the Psalmist in that case that heart offering comes after a very specific and concrete act of sin, not just a blurry generalisation.

Sometimes in our hearts we can hide a brokenness and we can hide sin, and we can hide these things even from ourselves sometimes – hiding the hurts we've experienced or hiding from responsibility from bad choices we've made. These readings at the start of Lent invite us to take the opportunity to examine your heart and your temptations, and to remember anew that who you *are* is God's loved child; and to find that God is gracious and tender and gentle with what is deep in our hearts.

One of the stories from the World Day of Prayer, that we celebrated on Friday, struck me as an example of holding our hurt and pain before God, letting God be God and remembering our place as God's child. In the material that was provided for us, one woman shared her story of having an abusive and controlling partner. She had brokenness inside, lots of pain and lots of fear. She brought it all before God. She wrote,

“When I was pregnant, he hurt me so badly that the baby was born early. In the days I spent in the hospital, not knowing if my child would live, God spoke to me; “Stop praying for your child to live. Instead, pray for my will to be done.” I said “yes” to God, who offered only to be present, with no promises that everything would be OK...”

This is absolutely not to say that it is wrong to pray for a child to live, or to pray for healing. In the midst of our praying, though, one of the things for us to learn is to release control to God – not to those who abuse us, and not grasped to ourselves. In due course, that woman was thankfully released from fear to find beauty and joy in life, in God's grace and plan.

In the book that I've been reading about a former white supremacist,¹ the author had to gradually acknowledge what was going on in his heart – how he'd been affected by betrayals and abuse, and had then been ripe for finding belonging in groups like he did; but also that he also had responsibility for the impacts his actions had on innocent people around him. He had to rediscover himself as loved and valued apart from those broken things that had dominated his heart.

Where we have brokenness or sin hidden in our hearts it can affect our lives and relationships. Lent offers us an opportunity to examine our hearts and start the work of opening them up for God's gentle welcome, recognising where we make choices based on our historical hurts and patterns instead of hearing God's call to us now, as loved children of God.

¹ The Cure for Hate, by Tony McAleer

Jesus used disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and fasting as ways of being deeply grounded in his relationship with God, so that he didn't need to test God, but learned to trust and follow God at the Spirit's prompting.

What can we learn from this?

To the glory of God.

Amen.