

Lent 1, 2013, Year C

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Psalm 91: 1, 2, 9-16

Romans 10: 8b-13

Luke 4: 1-13

Over the next few Sundays, we shall consider the question implicit in all three readings.

OT. The people in Deuteronomy had been freed from slavery. They were nomads who had grown from a single family; aliens who became a nation. They were on their way to the promised land.

Epistle. Paul wrote to Christians who had been separated by racial origins, Jew and Greek. They were people who had learned that their backgrounds were irrelevant when it comes to their relationship with God, and with each other. There is no distinction: the same Lord is Lord of all.

And the gospel: Where have you come from? *If* you are the Son of God—it sounds as if the devil is trying to get Jesus to doubt where he came from.

My question then for the next few weeks is: where have we come from and where are we going?

Where are we now? We are humans. We do not know everything. We make mistakes. We cause problems, sometimes deliberately. In theological terms, we are sinners. And we are sinners *because* we are human. This is not something that we need to weep and wail over, necessarily. But it is most definitely something that we need to acknowledge. And today I will tell you something about what Holy Scripture says about sin.

I begin with some of the Hebrew (OT) concepts of sin.

- Something contrary to God's nature. Rebellion against God.
- Something deserving of punishment.
- Something morally wrong, perverse, crooked or twisted.
- To deceive, dissemble.
- To seduce, stray, to lack equilibrium.
- To cause others to stray.
- To break away, quarrel.
- To allow oneself to be enraptured, ravished.

And now some ideas in the New Testament

- Unintentional error.
- Wilful transgression, fault, offence, trespass, wickedness.
- To be hurtful, diseased, vicious, mischievous, malicious.
- To be unjust, treacherous, unrighteous, unlawful.
- To miss the mark and so not share in the prize.
- To cause others to roam, go astray, deceive, err, seduce, wander, be out of the way.

Maybe these could be summed up:

- To do anything that results in our separation from God
- To do anything that results in someone else being separate from God

Sin distorts our view of the world. It makes slaves of us. We find ourselves sleepwalking into trouble, hurting others and hurting ourselves, thoughtlessly, committing acts of petty cruelty and betrayal, that leave a trail of hurt and damage in their wake.

It's tempting to focus on the big sinners and the big sins, of cruelty, tyranny and hate. It's tempting to blame them 'over there'. But every cruel act on whatever scale begins with a thought in someone's mind. Thoughts that burrow into the brain, dulling our senses, getting us to sleepwalk into destruction. It happens easily. We are tempted by desire for bodily satisfaction; we are tempted by desire for power, to be like God; and we play mind games and seek quick and easily satisfaction. Satan in the desert tempts Jesus in exactly these ways.

We are complex individuals. We are, I think, basically good. But like supermarket trolleys we so easily stray. Most temptations we face are minor. Let's not exaggerate and get too worried, which can be harmful. But let's be realistic, and let's not be complacent, for we will slip into little sins that become bigger ones doing all sorts of things that hurt ourselves and, perhaps more importantly, others.

Today we heard Christ refusing to show off. Isn't that the cause of so much trouble. When we puff our chests out and strut around as if we owned the place. Christ being tempted by Satan actually gives us hope and shows us something about what it is to be truly happy. He refuses to turn stones into bread, but eats and who drinks with his disciples. Greedy people are too busy thinking about what they do not have to enjoy what they already possess.

Sin is a complex business that stops us from living. Lent is an opportunity to ask realistic questions about human happiness. To take up this opportunity is to ask if we have been sleepwalking into destructive ways of living, not so much out of active malice or greed, but almost carelessly, unthinkingly, almost like losing a bunch of keys through lack of thought and care.

This is where we start from.

Next week: where are we going with worship.