

Responding to the wilderness of deception

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Matt 4:1-11 St Johns

When I was consecrated as a bishop in the NT in 2007 I was told by another bishop that two things would change – my food will improve and I would never be told the truth again.

In Newcastle Diocese while we being examined by a Royal Commission for over 2 years, I quoted this to a senior lawyer and advisor to Newcastle bishops– he responded by saying that bishops needed to be protected. The Royal Commission described this leadership behaviour as wilful negligence.

Deception is as old as the genesis story of the serpent in today's lesson, while in the gospel reading Jesus confronts the father of lies

How do we live with a world which seeks to deceive us?

St Paul describes this as not wrestling with flesh and blood but powers and principalities.

“This England’ TV series illuminates political deceit during the Covid crisis in the UK.

In the Gospel of Matthew the descending Spirit anoints Jesus in his baptism for his role and mission. Now the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where his identity and mission will be tested.

Wilderness ‘eremos’ is deeply embedded in the memory of Israel, as the formative place of Israel's faith.

Deut 8:2; Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led

you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

It was in the wilderness, that Israel was called God's son Hos 11:1 It was also the place of failure, danger and the demonic. In Leviticus, the scapegoat which carries the sin of the people is chased into the wilderness. It is in the wilderness that the great personal encounters with God take place.

When Jesus enters the wilderness, he is walking in the steps of generations. He is facing the absolute terror for the Jewish psyche of the demonic but also of the fearful encounter with Yahweh, the God of the desert. The Son of God must face the failures of the past and navigate a new course for his people and all humanity.

It is Jesus' humanity, which is to be subjected to temptation –This is the human experience that Jesus enters as the Son of God. It is a wilderness from without and within that the Spirit leads him into.

Matthew provides the reader the equivalent of a passion play between the hero Jesus, and his enemy, the tempter to help us understand the trial he faced.

“He fasted for forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

At one level, the three forms of the temptation focus on the three areas of life which were vital to Israel as the covenant pilgrims seeking the promised land – sustenance, protection and prosperity.

Jesus succeeds where Israel failed in the 40 years wandering and the many others that followed. Jesus vindicates the voice

from heaven “this is my beloved Son” By so doing, Jesus defeats Satan and makes it possible for those who follow to enter the kingdom of heaven, the promised land, and enter a new freedom.

At another level each temptation is the very questioning of Jesus’ identity – “If you are the Son of God..” If you are the beloved, the One who carries the hope for the world, then you do not need to wait for God to vindicate you. It is the same temptation at the cross – “If you are the Son of God save yourself..”

Jesus risks everything by not giving in. He risks that his identity will remain ambivalent, contestable and unproved. In the face of temptation, what Jesus has is the word of God. He does not make up his replies, he does not search for an adequate rebuttal, or concoct a defence, simply restates God’s promise. He does not use his own power to overcome, rather he points to the One who sustains and loves. Jesus’ reply is the adoration of God. He turns to God alone to learn what he has come to do. This is his freedom – he has no pretensions of his own nor independence. No one could take Jesus’ life from him. He himself gives it. He might have refused. He might have kept his life. But he gives it. This is the humanity that Jesus embodies and it is the freedom he offers, to each who might travel with him through the wilderness towards the cross.

How do we respond to the wilderness of deception?

Know that Jesus has experienced this fully and is with you by the Spirit – be not overcome, overcome evil with good.

Know that Jesus has overcome the power of sin- both ready to forgive and restore the penitent. Do not make worse the burden of suffering on survivors by requiring them to forgive. This will come with time and grace. Let the burden of repentance be upon the offender and the institution.

Know that light overcomes darkness – let truth of God’s word

and of your story illuminate deceit.

The royal Commission power was in revealing the deceit of individuals and institutions over 40 years. Break the power of silence over the harming of the suffering. Listen to those who bear the suffering of the powerful. As a bishop being examined by the Royal Commission it felt like walking into the terror of a maze and of not knowing which way to turn. But I found companions on the way, courage to articulate my story and to name the behaviour of the powerful and turn the maze into a labyrinth – the light of Christ love and purpose carried me to the place of being a witness to the suffering.

I still at times feel like I'm in the wilderness but I have found the inner strength to confront deception and break the power of silence, and to let go of grievance over the lies of my church, to let the peace of Christ settle on my heart.