

LENT 1: “I am the Beloved” – *Andrew*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4: 1-13



Years ago I bought by son a book called “The Dangerous Book for Boys”. The book was written as a kind of reaction against the present health and safety culture where kids can’t do science experiments or even climb a tree without a risk assessment. So this book is full of good old-fashioned stuff like how to build a tree-house, or a go-cart, or skin a rabbit

– things where you might just get hurt somehow; but it is also full of wonders like how to identify the stars and also full of our history, all sorts of fascinating stuff about we became who we are as a people – everything from battles and pirate flags to empire-builders and explorers.

I like the idea of this dangerous book, because knowing who we are and where we’ve come from can make a difference to how we live in our dangerous, wonderful world. The Book of Deuteronomy is in its own way a Dangerous book, constantly challenging Israel to have courage for today and for tomorrow, by remembering who they are. Remember you were a wanderer, an alien, afflicted and oppressed – and in many ways you still are - and when you seek me, God says, bring all of that with you. So God challenges Israel to look to its past, and in doing so they know two things.

One is that in a sense they were nothing. They were just a bunch of trouble-makers really. But the other is that they were everything. Chosen, and promised a land flowing with milk and honey, a future and a hope.

On the one hand an acknowledgement of their weakness, their powerlessness; on the other such an amazing sense of possibility. And in Lent I think we need both these things too. The acknowledgement that we’re vulnerable, weak, breakable (life *is* dangerous); but also we’re capable of strength and love and creativity to an amazing degree – something that’s true for every human being.

So in Lent we bring to God everything we are – the good and the bad and we face up to the truth of who we are (which can be both scary and wonderful).

Out in the desert you see Jesus doing what we all have to do. He faces all *his* possible demons. And every possibility for good rises up before his eyes and twists

itself into a spectre of evil. Mystery is turned into magic: “turn these stones into bread!”; servant love into world domination: “all this glory I will give to you”; faith into quick-fix certainties: “if you are the Son of God... no problem. Do as you like, Jesus!”

But Jesus doesn't defeat these demons by some kind of macho superpowers, flexing the muscles of divinity. Instead Jesus reaches into the depths of his *own* history. And there he hears another voice, and it's the voice he heard as he rose up out of the Jordan, shaking the water out of his hair: “You are my Beloved.”

I once heard the Dutch-American priest Henri Nouwen speak about this before an audience of hundreds of young people at a Greenbelt Festival years ago. They hung on his every word. And the reason for that is that he came across as a real complex human being, struggling like the rest of us. Henri Nouwen was never really at home in this world. He was deeply insecure. He needed constant reassurance that he was loved and valued, he was seriously hard work as a friend and sometimes tested his friendships to the limit.

He died, just in his early sixties, never reconciled to his own sexuality, but having in his last years discovered a kind of peace by becoming a member of a L'Arche community –wonderful family groups created for people with learning disabilities. And it was those people who finally healed him and gave him peace, because they didn't know he was a famous writer or a Harvard professor. He was just Henri – and they loved him. And it was this experience of finally knowing he was loved and how transformative that was that made him understand what was happening for Jesus in the wilderness in a really powerful way.

No matter what temptation Satan throws at Jesus – Satan even quotes scripture (“for it is written...”) – in the face of every one Jesus can resist not because he superman, but because he knows he's loved. He knows who he is. This is Satan up to his old tricks from the garden of Eden – “Did God say?” But in the desert facing all these voices of doubt Jesus reaches back to that moment at the Jordan and he has all the strength he needs: “I'm the Beloved.”

Often when we're going through tough times the voice we hear inside our own heads can *be* a voice that tempts us to despair over ourselves or other people or the world. But the self-knowledge of Jesus needs to be ours too – this is *our* salvation history: When life is tough, I am the Beloved, when I make a mess of things, I am the Beloved, in life or death, joy or sorrow, I'm the Beloved.

So in Lent we remember who we are from God's perspective. This *is* a dangerous world, and there are no risk assessments for our journey with Jesus. But for all of it

there is only one thing we need to know, so let's take it home with us today: I am the Beloved.