

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 4: 1-13

“Lent – A Time of Creative Self-examination”

1. Lent, discipline and denial or space for spiritual transformation?

In the movie *Chocolat*, the people of a small French town of Lansquenet in 1959 celebrate Lent as “a season of rigorous discipline and denial”.^[1] They attend church regularly, behave as they believe they should, and respect the local authorities, such as the mayor. Yet, the most religious of the townsfolk, led by the mayor are “repressive, austere and distrustful of strangers”.^[2] On Ash Wednesday an unwed mother, Vianne (Juliette Binoche) and her daughter come to town. Instead of going to church, Vianne opens up a chocolate shop to which, unlike the church, everyone is welcome and respected.

So of what benefit is Lent as a season of rigorous discipline and denial? Dan Clendenin expresses it this way:

Beyond the popular caricatures of a whimsical film [like *Chocolat*] there are more sinister realities. Miroslav Volf explores these matters in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*. Far more than we would ever like to admit, Christians have legitimated various hatreds; instead of being a conscience of our culture we have sometimes been “but a sophisticated echo of its base prejudices.” Our Christian heritage bears its share of complicity in the evils of Jewish genocide, American slavery, the conquests of Native Americans, and missiological imperialisms exported around the world.^[3]

Yet, the church has at times not only expressed prejudice as well as disempowering and oppressing others, but, as the movie shows, it shapes and coerces its own. The young priest of the town in the movie *Chocolat* allows himself to be controlled and manipulated by the mayor, who edits and influences his sermons. We learn though, that the mayor’s burdensome, lonely and angry existence without his wife, who has mysteriously left him. Repressing his loss and pain, he austere projects it outward by using his social power to maintain his control of at least part of his life.

This is not the kind of Lent we are considering here at St Aidan’s.

Nor is the wilderness experience of Jesus and the temptations in Luke 4: 1-13 set within this paradigm of rigorous self-discipline and denial.

In fact, such a stoic approach perpetuates repression and exclusion because it does not address or facilitate a relationship with repressions and the personal and structural roots of exclusion. A new awareness of inner and social repressions free individuals and citizens to live a life of abundance!

2. Lent is a creative time for self-examination of inner and outer life

I want to suggest that this is why we need Lent! We need regular wilderness journeys of self-examination and to explore what our temptations are for us!

The people in the town in the movie *Chocolat* could have taken Lent as a time of self-examination! To explore in spiritual direction:

- The people: what were their unconscious desires that influenced them to give away their power to the aristocratic society, like the mayor; what power did they gain from creating an identity from this master-slave relationship? What were their own values?
- The priest: what were his unconscious desires that influenced him to collude with the mayor, to give away his own self, to have no trust in himself, did he have any sense of identity and calling?
- The mayor: how would he engage with his repression, to see the loneliness and sadness that lay hidden within him because his wife left him; what was he getting out of overpowering other people?

3. Jesus in wilderness spirituality

In our reading in Luke 4: 1-13, Jesus makes his way into the wilderness to experience his own form of self-examination of his inner and outer life.

As William Loader writes:

Wilderness was the wild place, the waiting place, the place of preparation. It also connected then, as it does now, to very basic spirituality: a place to grapple with God, a place to learn dependence on nature and its provisions, a place of extremes or contrasts, of wild beasts and desert. It is the Lenten space par excellence. [\[4\]](#)

Yet, a Lenten spirituality of discernment is much more complex than Loader suggests. As Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual director of the Enneagram, writes:

I believe we are all an infinite mystery to ourselves. I quote the German Jesuit Karl Rahner: The faith it takes to accept the infinite mystery that you are, and the faith it takes to accept the infinite mystery that God is, are finally the same act of faith. I would add that the acceptance of both mysteries - who I am and who God is - moves forward in parallel order. [\[5\]](#)

Jesus needed to keep on discovering the truth about himself, as each human being does, not just grappling with who God is for him! He needed to spend time to discern what his unconscious desires were, how he imagined his identity, how he related to power and politics. This is what every new candidate for the ministry does! They enter a formation process to gain greater understanding of themselves, their strengths, their vulnerabilities, their values and so on.

And what was the Word of God that accompanied his wilderness experience?

The words from Deuteronomy, to love God and neighbour? Not most recently! They were the words from God in his baptism: that he was valued, loved, and had the graceful promise of God's presence as he set up to minister in the world.

4. The Enneagram as an instrument of discernment and transformation

I have mentioned the Enneagram. The word is made up of two Greek words: *ennea*, meaning the

number nine, and *gram*, meaning *point or space*. The Enneagram is an ancient spirituality instrument that describes 9 types of personality styles situated on a circle in the nine points. You will see the diagram on the back of your order of service, and at the end of this witness.

I experienced the Enneagram in 1993, through my spiritual director, Sister Margaret Cain, at a time of an extreme wilderness experience. It enabled me to gain a profound understanding of my complex identity, revealing a great deal of my unconscious ways of thinking, feeling and acting. It helped me understand others in their complexity.

To quote Richard Rohr again:

Enneagram conversion makes you less judgmental than you were, more "spacious" and more accessible. If you haven't become less judgmental, then the conversion has not happened to you.

Converted people hold themselves lightly and leave room for change and growth. They are therefore capable of community. Others can get in, and they can get out - of themselves.

Your ability to accept me frees me; I hope to do the same for you and for every other. I think the Enneagram process could and should make community very possible. I mean, community in the deepest and truest sense, where people are empty enough of themselves to make room for the other, where I hold a place in my heart for the one who is not like me.[\[6\]](#)

The new work that I am shaping includes being a spiritual director utilising the Enneagram, Lacanian psychoanalysis and organisational change. You will see brief descriptions of the nine personality types on the back of the order of service. I will continue to introduce it to you throughout Lent.

5. Meditation:

Let us enter our Lenten wilderness journey together, using the stones we hold tenderly in our hands.

This stone has its own complex history and life, as our life does.

Just take some time to hold your stone and discern how it reflects your life's journey: look at it with a mixture of honesty, confession, compassion and celebration.

Does the stone's hardness remind you of things held tightly and firmly? In the past and in the present?

- precious versions of truth?
- having things your way, and resenting it when others had their way?
- what desires and ambitions have held your life too firmly?
- what fears, anxieties, anger and guilt have held you too strongly?
- what stories about our life do we cling onto?

Name and let go of the rough aspects

Sense the smoothness of the rock.

What hardness has been let go, and what smoothness and lightness can we celebrate?

- let go of hard won ideas

Sometimes the stones on our life journeys rise up to meet us,
and free us to see life differently.

Can you feel the strength of the stone?

Remember times when firm foundations held you.

The word to us in Jesus Christ is that Christ will come in healing, in hope, in understanding.
Christ will come to the world with compassion, freedom and justice, bringing all the signs of
hard-won life.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Chocolat*,
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=2567>

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Dan Clendening, *Welcoming Embrace*, Week of Monday, May 14, 2001

[4] William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary*, Lent 1

[5] Richard Rohr, *Advanced Enneagram*, 5.

[6] Richard Rohr, *Advanced Enneagram*, 3f.