

Addiction, temptation and grace: God for me

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 March 2017
A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Warren Talbot
Lent 1A

**Deuteronomy 34: 1-8, 10; Matthew 4: 1-11; Contemporary Reading:
“Letting Go” from Edwina Gateley: *There was no path so I trod one.***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

It was Oscar Wilde who once famously declared “*I can resist everything, except.....temptation*”.

I can resist everything, except....dot, dot dot.

I’ll let you fill in your own dots. I’m too busy filling in my own.

Today is the first Sunday in the Church’s Season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday we gathered, placed ashes on our foreheads or hands, and commenced a Lenten journey together.

We are quite familiar with today’s reading from the Matthean community. There are some texts in Scripture we never hear at all. There are some we hear once every three years. And then there are some we hear every year – and this is one of those stories.

The temptations of Jesus are found in each of the three Synoptic Gospels. That’s one reason why we hear them every year. The Markan writer deals with the temptations in a single verse. The Matthean and Lukan communities have access to oral traditions, they have access to Mark’s one verse, and possibly a further written text which is no longer extant.

As Margaret Mayman pointed out last week, with regard to the story of the Transfiguration, we are not dealing here with fact – but neither are we dealing with fiction. We are certainly not listening to a history or a biography in the usual sense of those terms.

Gospel stories give us a combination of memory, told within diverse oral traditions, combined with the interpretation: what does the figure of Jesus mean for the community telling the story?

The Jewish Matthean community sees the figure of Jesus as the new Moses. Last week, Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights. This week, Jesus is in the wilderness for ...you guessed it40 days and nights.

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Moses is actually one of the great tragic figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the great tragic figures! Moses leads the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness for – there's that number again - 40 years. In our text today, Moses is on the mountain. He can actually see the Promised Land. But he never makes it.

Moses dies on the mountain, and is left in an unknown burial place. Hope and the possibilities of new life have been glimpsed – but not realised. Christians are very good at ignoring the tragedy inherent in the figure of Jesus, the new Moses – the god who is crucified.

Glimpsing hope, but never quite getting there, is also the tragedy of people living with an active addiction.

In our text today, the wilderness is not a desert retreat. It's not a romanticised place of renewal and refreshment and relaxation. It's a place of temptation. Of hunger and thirst. A crucible of inner struggle and torment.

The story of the temptations pre-figure the tragedy of the crucified god, and thus speaks to the mortality of our human journey. I certainly don't recommend the movie - but Mel Gibson got something brutally correct when he named the Passion as the "last temptation" of the Christ. The last temptation – death itself.

Every week in our church building, and in the Pilgrim House Community Room next door, about 150 people gather, in 10 different groups, following a 12 Step recovery program. These are people who are, or have been, in the wilderness of addiction.

The groups meeting at Pitt Street focus on alcohol, smoking, overeating, dependent relationships, and relating to other people who are living with an addiction. There is a specific cross recovery group for LGBTIQ people, but I hasten to add that LGBTIQ people are not recovering from being LGBTIQ but facing issues to do with alcohol or smoking or the other addictions I've mentioned.

Of course the list of addictions doesn't stop with the ones that are meeting in our buildings every week. It extends, of course, to the use of illicit drugs, the misuse of prescribed pills, compulsive gambling or compulsive sexual behaviour.

And in case you are starting to feel a little bit smug, don't forget the addiction to money, addiction to possessions or power - not to mention emails, Facebook and Instagram.

And, for some religious people, the addiction is to moralistic self-righteousness. I thought I would love to run a 12 Step program for them – until I realised... I'd probably have to join!

I'm not suggesting that everything most of us enjoy, and do on a regular basis, such as eating or going to Mardi Gras on a rainy day, is an addiction.

**It's the relationship to the substance or the behaviour which is at issue; and it's the relationship to the substance or the behaviour which, in my mind, touch on matters of faith; of where we place our ultimate concern.**

The Matthean temptations are materialism (living by bread alone), power (ruling all the countries of the world) and idolatry (worshipping a false god).

It is this, the third temptation of Jesus, which is most relevant here.

If the word God has something to do with “ultimate reality”, or as people say in 12 step groups: a “higher power”, then people trapped in addiction are worshipping a false god. They, or more correctly we, have given in to the third temptation.

Addiction, and the grace of recovery, is not a solely an individual matter, though many scientists now accept that there is a genetic basis for some addictions. Social, cultural and political factors do play a role - as do issues of gender, gender identity and sexuality.

There is no shortage of false gods. We worship the god of consumer capitalism. We worship the false god of economic development which justifies destroying the only home we have.

I could go on....but I want to talk about an amazing thing. It's called .... *grace*. We see it every weekday in this building. Women and men who have been able to be honest about their addiction, reach out for help, and slowly receive the strength of mutuality and community – one day at a time.

In 12 Step groups people use the word “God” but have some difficulty with it – just like a number of us here at Pitt Street. A solution that some 12 Step people have found is to use the letters g.o.d. as an acronym.

Here are two examples that I've heard:

*“When I was compulsively gambling every day, my life was chaotic and unpredictable. Now I don't do that, I have “Good Orderly Direction”. That's 'God' for me.”*

Or,

*“When I was swallowing far too many Valium tablets after breakfast and watching daytime television, I never left the house. Now I don't do that, I go for a walk in the local park and appreciate the Great Out Doors. That's 'God' for me.”*

My favourite acronym for g.o.d. comes from Alcoholics Anonymous. In AA some people state that AA is a Gathering Of Drunks. That's 'God' for me.

I believe that this is a profound statement of faith. The amazing thing we name as Grace is found in gathering. We can't do addiction, or temptation, or simple living - by ourselves. We need others. We need what the theologian Carter Heyward, herself a recovering alcoholic, describes as “*the power of mutual relation*”. We are not alone. That's 'God' for me.

This amazing thing we name as Grace is found in a gathering of ... drunks. Not a group of people who have got their act together, and are running the world, running a political party or a business – or even, dare I say, the church.

But a 12 Step group is a gathering of broken people – a group of people in need of healing, wholeness and community.

It's the grace we see when we gather around a common table, sharing bread and wine, declaring that "*for everyone born, there's a place at the table*".

That's Grace enough for me –

and, my justice-seeking friends -

that's Grace enough for all of us.

AMEN.