

*Lent 1 2009*

What does life feel like for you at the moment?

Do you ever feel as though you are like a piece of driftwood, being carried along by a relentless tide, bashed against rocks, stranded for a while then swept back against your will?

Whether the problems we are facing are to do with health, or relationships, or work and finance, there are times in life when we can feel totally utterly powerless. Because this can be so debilitating, we often assume that this is the worst state in which to be.

If only we had the power to change things!

It is interesting to consider that what drove Jesus in to the wilderness was the opposite problem.

He has just had an amazing experience, the confirmation that he is God's beloved. He has power.

How much? For what reason?

In Luke and Matthew's gospel we are given far more detail about his wilderness temptations, but in Mark simply the bare minimum - *He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

The possibilities open to Jesus were huge. In those 40 days he had to consider what he could do and then make his choices. We know, from the gospels, what he chose. He chose never to use his power for his own profit or fame, he chose never to use it for his few special favourites or his pet projects. He chose to use his power in a way that reflected God's concerns for his people, caring for the sick and those who had gone astray, and challenging injustice and hypocrisy wherever he encountered it.

When we think about the life of Jesus, what we often remember is his teaching, the wonderful parables he told, his skill with words. This was not a special or supernatural power, but one that was born of conviction. Indeed, although he performed miracles, he did not use his power to change his own circumstances at all.

He was whipped, humiliated, and then put to death on a cross and not once did he use any special powers.

But we are not Jesus, and still, deep down, we long for the power to change our lives.

Perhaps we need that wilderness experience. This is a hard thing to do in today's society, because the mental turmoil it produces is unacceptable – we will be given Prozac or St John's wort to lift our mood. It is too hard for relatives – there is no mention of how Jesus' family coped when he disappeared for a month without word. In that wilderness we can discover the nature of the power that we *do* have and begin to make choices about how, when or whether we might exercise that power.

That will expose us to great temptation, for all power can be abused. Yet perhaps that is no greater than the temptation to despair that can come from feeling powerless.

So what power do we have?

We have enormous power. In every encounter, whether with relative, friend or stranger we have the power to make a difference to that person's day. Every smile or grimace, hasty word or kind remark has its effect. It is in the small things that change occurs. Because we cannot change the economic climate or reverse global warming, does not mean that we have no power. But there are things we may not be able to do. We may not be able to cure the person we love or get rid of our own pain, we may not be able to live the way we used to live. Life may never be the same again.

The whole history of Israel as written in the scriptures is about a nation's struggle with power and powerlessness. When Israel was in exile, the people felt powerless. They longed to go back to their land, for things to be as they had been. Finally, they were allowed back, but things were never the same. Much of the message of the prophets of the exile is about the need to accept the new situation, the requirement to acknowledge the pain and regret and bereavement at the loss of what once was. Until the loss is owned, there can be no moving forward.

Accepting and understanding our powerlessness in the face of loss, whether that is the death of someone we love, or the break up of a marriage, or the loss of a job or lifestyle, is as important as understanding our power.

Yet, the bible has something else to teach us about those feelings of powerlessness.

Consider for a moment the call of the prophets.

Jeremiah was told 'Go and be a prophet'. God said to Jonah 'Go to Ninevah'. Gideon was told 'Go and smite the Midianites. Moses was instructed 'Go to the Pharaoh and tell him to let Israel go from Egypt'.

And what do they reply: Jeremiah says 'I am far too young', Moses says 'I can't do that, I'd be no good at all at it', Gideon says 'I can't do it, I'm too small and weedy', and as for Jonah, he was so appalled by the prospect that he just ran away.

Or, because we had it in our reading today, think about Noah. Was he already an accomplished carpenter? Even if he was, he must have wondered about giving up months of time to build an ark. Were his neighbours also given the instructions but chose to ignore them?

What is clear from the people of the Old Testament is that God did not call only the strong and powerful. He chose people who felt powerless, too young, too weak, incapable of public speaking. People whose own lives were in a mess. And what he says to each of them is 'you are strong enough, you are powerful enough, you can do this, because I will be with you'.

So as we enter the wilderness, whether of our own volition or because we reluctantly find ourselves there, we will learn about our strengths and our weaknesses, what we have the power to do and what we cannot change. But before we can make choices, we also need to listen to find out what it is that God wants us to do, for whatever that is, however unlikely it seems, we will have the power to do that, because he will be with us.

Let me end with the prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr:

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.