

Mark 1: 9-15 (26 Feb 2012)

07:30, 09:00, 19:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England, culminating in the Battle of Hastings. The tapestry is in fact an embroidered cloth, nearly 70 metres long. It comprises of some fifty scenes with Latin captions embroidered with coloured woollen yarns. The tapestry is now exhibited in a Museum of Bayeux.

One little scene of the tapestry depicts Bishop Odo, a Norman bishop who accompanied the army, urging or prodding the troops forward with his bishop's staff (Scene No. 54). The Latin embroidered under the scene says, "Hic Odo Episcopus Baculum Tenens Confortat Pueros" and I am told on good authority that this may be translated as, "Bishop Odo comforts the boys with his crosier (staff)." Literally pushing them forward into battle... comforting them?!

These days "comfort" evokes images of warmth and consolation: When we seek consolation we seek a "comfy chair" or satisfy ourselves with "comfort food." For us comfort is something constant that gives security and contentment. Yet the root of the word "comfort" came into English at about the time the Bayeux Tapestry was being embroidered. It came from the Old French confort, which in turn came from Late Latin confortāre - to strengthen very much (con - intensive +fortis - strong).

I am sure you have heard the Holy Spirit being referred to as the comforter, and today we heard how the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness or the place devoid other people. Mark's account of the temptation or testing of Jesus is the shortest of all the Gospels. There is no mention of the three temptations which Jesus counters by quoting scripture, nor does Mark give any indication of the outcome of Satan's testing of Jesus. Mark simply says: "Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

For Mark, this is not so much Satan tempting Jesus to sin as it is a test of Christ's strength. Mark is setting up a confrontation between Jesus and his kingdom and Satan and his kingdom. In this way, the wild beasts could be understood as Satan's demons, pitted against Jesus and his messengers or angels. In essence, Mark is illuminating a cosmic battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

As we continue on our Lenten journeys, we would do well to stop and consider that the reign of Satan is at war with our desire to be Christ followers. We encounter Satan's kingdom in the world, in our own sinfulness and in Satan himself. Our challenge in Lent and always is to equip ourselves with the spiritual disciplines so that we can do spiritual battle, so that Jesus might be at work in and through us. If a person goes to gym simply to look good and be seen, there is really very little point to the discipline of a gym routine. If a person goes to gym so that their strength can be used for a sport or to help a person in distress, or to deal with stress, then the gym routine has real value.

Some of the greatest spiritual athletes known to us are the mystics. A mystic is really just a person who seeks and desires union or oneness with God. One of the great German mystics was a man who became known as Meister Eckhart. Eckhart taught that the greatest of all virtues was detachment. Detachment is not a popular word today. It seems to imply aloofness and indifference. If we were to accuse someone of being detached, it would mean that they are lacking in feeling and passion. However, for the mystics, detachment meant inner freedom or the ability to let go. Eckhart taught that detachment was even more essential than love itself, because without freedom from our attachments we cannot love fully and unconditionally.

So, what are our attachments? The most obvious of our attachments include money, possessions, luxuries and pleasures. Addiction could be considered an extreme attachment. Some may be addicted to the endorphins produced by running while others may be addicted to alcohol. Attachments are really anything which we cling to and therefore become enslaved to. Some of our attachments may seem quite healthy and good; the problem is our selfish inability to let go of these things when we are challenged by the needs of others.

It may be helpful to explore three fairly common attachments that are less obvious to us, and here I am indebted to the insights of Albert Nolan:

We can become attached to people. Much of what passes as love in our upside down world is in fact possessiveness. We cling to people because we think we need them. 'I need you' is supposed to be an expression of love. Some people like to be told: 'I cannot live without you.' True love is not based upon my needs. True love is not possessive. True love gives wings and not a cage. Attachment to others and excessive dependence upon them is not love.

Some people have a particularly strong attachment to their ideas and the undermining of long held certainties can result in huge upheaval. The challenge here is often, not to replace one idea with another one but rather, to replace certainties with uncertainty or mystery. Obsession with absolute certainty is yet another form of slavery. It is often an attempt at finding security without having to put all our trust in God.

Detachment is not giving up everything, but being willing to give up anything when called to do so. This is true inner freedom, in this sense Jesus was radically free, not even attached to his own life. I am sure you will recall the paradoxical statement of Jesus; when we cling to our lives, we are already dead, as soon as we are willing to die, we become fully alive and truly free.

I recently watched a movie called 'Of Gods and Men'. It is one of the most poignant pieces of cinema I have ever seen. It is the story of a group of Cistercian Monks living in Algeria. The rise of an extremist Islamic group threatens their safety and the Algerian government strongly suggests that they move back to France. In one of the scenes the monks gather to discuss whether they should leave. One of the older brothers says very simply, 'I died long ago when I chose to follow Christ, my place is here.' Not all the brothers show his level of detachment, but in the end all of them choose to stay. I wonder how we would deal with a similar situation.

Sometimes, instead of voluntarily letting go of our attachments, they are taken from us. We could lose our homes and money, those that we are attached to could die. This kind of loss is generally experienced as a tragedy, but it could also help us to become more detached. Whether we actively seek to be detached or are passively forced to let go, detachment is never easy. In fact, none of this is possible without putting our trust in God. Trusting God, as Jesus did, does not mean clinging to God; it means letting go of everything so as to surrender ourselves and our lives to God. In the end we must become detached from God too. We must let go of God in order to jump into the embrace of a loving father whom we can trust implicitly.

May we experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our Lenten disciplines.