**Sermon Lent 1C** Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

March 6th 2022

Within the lifetime of everyone here, even of those of us who are relatively young, there has been a series of quite profound changes we could once not have imagined. Women and men are more equal, acceptance of gay , lesbian people and increasingly so transgender is now utterly unremarkable, our towns and cities are much less homogenous – our neighbours are increasingly from anywhere and anywhere. All of this, and much else, is to be celebrated but there is a shadow to this, another side to the coin if you like.

In our increased mobility, in our multitude of choices, in the possibility of what is nowadays called “*reinventing yourself*” there is a risk of disconnection. While the bonds of family, community, culture and nation can be too restrictive, too tight, too stifling what happens when those bonds wear, fray and we become detached from our context and community? This may be a necessary freedom for some, yet I think there is a risk of disconnection, of the story of me becoming detached from bigger wider stories in which I have a part. With this there is a risk of forgetfulness, of not cultivating, not remembering, not honouring that which connects me to you, one to the other.

Way back in 2000, during my induction for my first job in New Zealand I attended a day on Maori culture at a marae in Lower Hutt. At the time the way Maori traditionally introduce themselves sounded quaint to me, maybe a bit silly.

As well as naming themselves they go on to day; my tribe is, my mountain is. My river is, my *waka* is. So a person is introduced not as an isolated individual but as a member of a community, as a person of a particular whenua or land – defined here by its mountain and river – and is even connected to the mythical stories of the beginning of the tribe by reference to the waka, the canoe, in which their ancestors arrived.

While my initial response was something to the effect of “boy, what a performance,” the more time goes by the more I appreciate the wisdom of it. None of us – as John Donne said – “*is an island.*” We are connected to people, to place and to a shared memory longer and broader than our own.

This is a theme picked up on in our reading from *Deuteronomy*.

Now when we have a reading from the likes of *Deuteronomy* your eyes might glaze over for a minute or two; but it is a fascinating book with a particular context. The name we give for the book means “second law” in Greek. It reads like a collection of three sermons by Moses given just before the Israelites entered the Promised Land.

You will be very hard put to find a reputable biblical scholar who will tell you this is what it is. The consensus is the book dates back to two periods of change and reform, one under King Josiah which made the religion of Judah more monotheistic and later the return from exile in Babylon where – amid the ruins they had returned to – the Jewish people needed to re-establish the practices and ritual of a faith they had kept alive in exile.

What seem to be Moses’s sermons are reflections informed by these contexts and in them the Law is re-presented, offered in another way.

So our text today begins with instructions on tithing and gifts which serve to remind people that their place in the land is through a covenant, their relationship as a people with God, the text goes on to tell the story of their liberation from Egypt, a story that informs how the first Christians understood the resurrection and shaped the liturgies we used to celebrate it.

The recounting of this history begins with the Hebrew words “*arami oved ami*” a wandering Aramean was my father. By beginning the story there, with Abraham and his journeying we see the Jewish equivalent of naming your *whakapapa*. In this story the simple act of offering a portion of the harvest is linked to the whole story not simply of the farmer but of the land and people. This all may seem rather dry and of maybe nothing more than a passing archaeological interest but the story is an image of connectedness through shared story, memory and myth. It also gives a particular light and context to our Gospel, the familiar story of the temptation of Jesus.

We hear this story on the first Sunday of every Lent, how Jesus, filled with a sense of mission and purpose after his baptism, went into the wilderness to face temptation, how here he was offered power, wealth and status if he would just walk away and forget his true self. In this story it is probably helpful to think of the Devil not as the horned anti-God of later Christian thought, but as Shiatan, the Temptor in Jewish tradition, who tested Job.

Jesus fasts for forty days, naturally at the end of it he was famished. The devil suggests that he as “the Son of God” should turn a stone into bread that he might eat. Jesus reminds him that “*one does not live by bread alone*.” The Temptor then shows Jesus “*all the kingdoms of the world*” and offers him power over them. To which Jesus replies “*worship the Lord, serve only him*.” The Temptor then went on to suggest Jesus throw himself from a high place because surely this would force God’s hand and angels would be sent to rescue him. Jesus replies that we are not to put God to the test.

We have often read this story as if Jesus is showing some superhuman resistance, some heroic virtue. I would argue that he responds in his truth, he responds as a faithful Jew would. He responds in recognition of being in covenant with God and owing God his very life. What the Temptor offered him dishonoured that, it undermined it.

None of us, I hope, is about to be whisked off by the Prince of Darkness and tempted by wealth or power. Chance would be a fine thing I hear you say.

But we are all tempted every day, not to great acts of wickedness but to acts of forgetting.

Forgetting our connectedness to one another, to family and to community, to people and to shared memory. We allow the ties of memory, friendship and family to loosen perhaps too far.

We manage to insulate ourselves from the hardship of others by simply not seeing them. A white South African friend once said to me that under apartheid white South Africans, even those of liberal politics, would grow accustomed to not seeing black South Africans. Of course they didn’t become invisible but they were confined to the background and it became easier not to interact with them as anything other than master and servant. It took mindful awareness, a deliberate intention to relate differently.

This forgetfulness can inflict us as individuals, it can also inflict us as a society.

In the late 1940s a visiting foreign academic thought that New Zealand should erect a statue in Auckland harbour as a counterpart to the Statue of Liberty in New York. However new migrants arriving in Auckland harbour would have been welcomed by a Statue of Equality. So deep did equality seem to be in our national psyche this academic felt there could be no truer welcome to New Zealand.

What have we forgotten since then?

Have we forgotten that, in the words from the imposition of ashes

Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.

This Lent let us remember and yes, remembering our mortality will do us no harm. But let us remember our stories, let us remember our connections. Let us remember the stories which name us and give us place. Be those the stories of our faith, the stories of our family or the stories of our people. Let us resist the temptation to see ourselves and our stories as cut off and adrift from these; for our stories are made complete in the telling of the whole **Amen**