

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Lent 1A*

*Sunday 1 March 2020*

*If you are – who are we?*

*Jesus' identity and ours in trusting God alone.*

'If' – two letters that make up a word that immediately casts doubt, raises anxiety, begs a question to be answered.

If – means it could go one way or another, a yes or a no or it can leave us in the desert of maybe, on the fence of indecision.

'If you are the Son of God' Jesus is asked.

Led by the Spirit into the wilderness from the pinnacle of being called beloved by God in his baptism, left famished from 40 days and nights of fasting, now confronted by the word 'if'.

Here he is, tested as to who he is and who he will go on being as God's Son.

It all starts with the little word if – it is enough to start uncertainty and doubt, to erode trust in God and put forward the possibility of another way, another choice.

If you are the Son of God make these stones bread.

Will he satisfy himself alone first? Will he trust in God to provide?

His answer is clear: one does not live by bread alone – Jesus will trust in God to provide.

If you are Son of God – will he test God? Jesus refuses to test God and refuses to think of his own safety.

If you will fall down I'll give you power. Jesus is faced with the question of power over others, rather than being with others.

Each time the question is raised Jesus answers with no ifs or buts or maybes but makes it clear by quoting scripture what sort of Son of God he is and will be. So in the rest of Matthew his ministry is the opposite of each of these tests.

He does not satisfy himself, but makes food of loaves and fish to feed others.

He rejects testing God and clinging to his own safety by being willing to follow God's will even to the cross, trusting that God will do something with it. Remember the voice of those who pass by saying if you are the Son of God come down from the cross.

Jesus refuses to seize power but instead preaches about God's reign of love and models what it means to live life differently where love is the most important value.

So I wonder what we do with the 'ifs' in our own lives, those moments of decision and doubt that raise their heads particularly when we are stretched.

Who are we and what is most important to us?

This same question of identity is at the heart of the Genesis reading where the human beings did not accept their God given identity.

They were given freedom in the garden to care for it, the garden that provided them nourishment. The one limit was not being like God. We are made in God's image but are not God.

We are limited, fallible fragile. The first humans decided to look for something else and the result of that was fear as they hid in the garden.

Lent is the season to reflect on who we are and who God is for us.

It is a spring time for the soul. The word Lent means to lengthen.

It is an invitation to clean the house of the soul and cleanse our systems to see what remains when comfort is gone.

How do we respond to the 'ifs' and 'buts' and uncertainties in our lives.

Where do we place our trust?

Do we want to just satisfy our own needs without thinking of others?

Do we want to have power over others and enforce our point of view? Or do we choose to listen?

As a church are we here just to satisfy our own needs?

As a church how are we focussed on those outside our doors?

How do we live as those who treasure the gifts in a culture of entitlement? Will we be givers or takers?

Perhaps the biggest ifs that can take power in our lives is anxiety, is the impulse just to react.

We live in this reality all the time.

Our wilderness and testing is often about being famished by being overwhelmed by fear than anything else.

It is at the heart of envy – not valuing what I have and wanting somebody else's.

Fear is at the heart of greed – all we have is in jeopardy, what we need will run out, so I want more and more.

Fear is at the heart of our indecision, deferring choices, maximising power by holding onto as many choices as possible.

Fear is not the voice of God. The voice of anxiety is never God's voice. Which is the voice we listen to?

Which voice do we feed this Lent?

Do we feed the still small voice of God, the peaceful voice found in times of quiet and solitude?

Or do we feed the voice of fear that calls us to run about and do more and more and grab more?

Both Genesis and Matthew invite us to remember who we are as God's beloved children who come from the earth and are to care for it as a gift.

Perhaps in the choices we make this week you might think of how you trust God in living with gratitude to the gifts we are given, rather than to grab at them and consume them with fear.

In this holy season of Lent when we walk with Jesus on the way to the cross we think about who we are called by God to be.

How do we grow in trusting the love and free gift of the abundance of grace which is ours through Christ in God?

How do we grow and flourish into our best selves through following Jesus?

Some people find it helpful to think of one thing they give up and one thing they take on which helps them to grow closer to God.

The tradition of fasting prayer and giving generously to others are there to help us live with an open handed approach to life and to God, knowing that God's grace and love are with us on the way.

O generous God,  
transform us in these Lenten days,  
that we may be gifts of love to one another.  
For there is enough for all.  
enough food.  
Enough money.  
Love overflowing. Amen.

*Lections:*  
*Genesis 2.15-17,3.1-7*  
*Psalm 32*  
*Romans 5.12-21*  
*Matthew 4.1-11*