

Sermon 14 February 2016 'Re-placing God'
Deut 26:1-11 Luke 4:1-13

Prayer: Journey with us, O God, through this day, through this season. As we follow your leading, may we draw strength from your presence beside us. And in those times and places we feel alone, help us to trust you will bring good to us and to all. Amen.

Today I want to direct our reflections to be about 'Re-Placing God'. Yes, you might set off thinking about **how**, and **with what**, we replace God in our lives... *and yes* that is one of the dominant themes of our 6 week journey to the cross of Easter; but today is also about **re**-placing God in our lives because that's what the texts spoke to me about as *I reflected* on them.

Deut speaks about harvest, land, abundance, and in worship, placing all that in **deep thankfulness** before God, placing God in the role as giver of all life and saying, thanks. And in Luke, I believe we can see how we are shown that Jesus came through his time of testing by **keeping** God's place central in his life. So yes – **whenever** – **however** we replace God, we get into real trouble. And the fact of life I keep finding, is, that we manage to get into enough trouble to keep us stressed – without volunteering for a time of 'wilderness' **or** following the leading of God's Spirit –into a wilderness!

But for all the warnings God's people **do** wander into the wilderness – with God's Spirit in the lead! It happened of course in a *spectacular* way a long time before Jesus; with the 40 years journey from Egypt into the Promised Land. A very *short version* of this experience we heard today, as the background for the offering of thanks of first fruits. *Scholars*^{*1} 'debate whether the offering was meant to be a regular one in Israel or if it refers to a single event. We might assume if the practice was followed then it was repeated as an annual event on the calendar. This way **each harvest** becomes a reminder of giftedness: of the *land*; of the One who is also present in the land; **and of those with whom** they were called to share the produce of the land. This sense of an on-going recognition of the land as gift; fits with the teaching of the whole book of Deuteronomy....

What is more interesting I think, is that these passages in Deuteronomy suggest that its words are not just for the Israelites who first entered the land. They are relevant for every Israelite of every succeeding generation (e.g. see Deut 4:38-40 and the way there is a shift in the sense of the word '**today**', and Deut 5:3). Thanksgiving for the land was not to be tied to the past or to one generation, but needed to be acknowledged '**today**', by the present generation. **Every** generation, as they heard the words of Deuteronomy, was to put itself in the role *as if they belonged* to the first people who were about to enter the land and enjoy it.

So when they followed this worship liturgy it would bring a new sense of giftedness, a new commitment to obedience, and a new sense of joy to be shared because they were being reminded of **where** they belonged; and this was as much a real-time place – a piece of land, and a Kairos-time (God-time) place of being with-in God. cV

There is a beauty in this piece of scripture that is precious I believe. It is about placing God in the right 'place' and when we do this – it is a time of joy, appreciation, and it just simply feels 'right'. God has given us this place to enjoy, care for, use for our needs **and is with** us in 'it'. And *I think* it is important to note that in the reciting of 'memories' there is included the real-time situation they lived through.

What comes to us strongly is that, **God is with them** – in the very hard times (Egypt); in the wonderful blessings of arriving in the Promised Land **and** in the settling down *in peace*, to produce the harvest.... God's place is with his people no matter what, where or when, **and the celebrating** of first fruits reminds his people of not only *their* place, but His as well! And **did you hear** that the relationship of giver and

*1 H Wallace *2 Sacradise

responder is to be shared with those who **cannot** offer 'first-fruits'. 1. The Levite, from the tribe of Levi who were / are the Priestly tribe and were forbidden to own land. They had no way of producing harvest-fruits to bring to the festival, and were commanded to reply on the other tribes for all their provisions. 2. They had to share with the 'alien', the foreigner, non-Israelite... Do we not *feel* in these ancient words, a fundamental understanding that the essence of our God is about justice and fair-play for **all** things living?

Our place is not only for us, it is for us to share with the 'have-nots' because sharing **is the beginning** of all things; is what the giver started. God shared this land and it's abundance with us, and in faith we follow! This makes our place both a place of faith in God, **and** a place of being able to physically worship (land / buildings), which we call home. We live in more than one 'space' or place, but we do not ever live alone! Not even when the 'place' is a chaotic; seemingly out of control place of 'unknowing'; full of wild things; a place of wilderness, even **Jesus'** physical place, in today's *scripture reading*. cV

I want to emphasise that today we are being shown that Jesus physical place was not the same as his faith / God place. He was not in any wilderness of *Spirit, trust, faith, God...* only there in real-physical time! I want to ask you to reflect on the idea that his battle or testing was actually about '**whose**' place the land, world and peoples etc – **whose place** it is and who is to be with us, and for us.

In Jesus word battle with the devil as recorded by Luke, he is standing firm that it is God's place and **no**-one – neither Jesus nor the Devil can re-place God. In this battle the Devil is trying to make Jesus – make God redundant – trying to make Jesus replace God in his life with – with *himself*, perhaps with the Devil, and Jesus says – NO. What else does Jesus have to do or say??? How much clearer can he be??? His values – are God's values **remember**, he is full of the Spirit, so these values are for us to live with, to live **in**, to die for!

What was Jesus being tempted with? **The usual really, do** we not usually find **ourselves** wrestling one way or another with: ^{*2}power and influence, wealth and consumption, personal appetites and greed? Can you think of any of the big justice issues that **don't** fall into these categories? How do we fight them? **Can** we follow Jesus? **Can** we remember to follow Jesus? Because *when or* if we can remember this step, then Jesus's battle today is what we can hold on to, and don't forget he **won!** Cv

Jesus refused to fall into the ^{*2}trap of trying to do it on 'evil's' terms. For instance: when Jesus was asked to turn a stone into a loaf of bread for him to eat a-lone, Jesus rejected it completely. He **did trust** God's care and protection; he was immersed in God's word **and used** that, *and if* you don't think you know many Bible verses to quote like Jesus did – just start singing (humming!!!) your favourite hymn and let the words fill your heart, and soul and know you are in God's place or **God is in your place!**

Today in the scripture the values Jesus embraced of ^{*2}'self-giving, humility and servant-hood, fasting and self-control' pushed back the force and influence of evil. **This story** is not so much about our fears of failure and loss of control and finding ourselves in a wilderness of chaos and how we must spend the next 6 weeks weeping in sorrow.

Yes this is a story for Lent, **I hope one** that makes us reflect on where and when **and even** how and why **we re-place** God in our lives... but also this is a story for us to claim, like Jesus, that this place – yes this chaotic, wild place we call home **is God's**. A story that enables us to follow Jesus making a stand that we will not agree or help to re-place God by anything. *And this 'place'* might be our soul, our heart, our life – as much as it might be our church, our community, our country...

This story is asking us if we **will continue** following Jesus because it just might be into a wild place, (spiritual or physical), because our faith history promises us – even in the wilderness **God is there** and will lead us out – into a place where we produce a harvest, return the first fruits to the giver remembering that **our place is God's place**, and that's the *prize from the battle*, Jesus – full of the Spirit **won**. Amen