

I was travelling by train last Friday. Across the aisle, sat a family of three Chinese children perhaps aged 7-13, their parents, and a person I presumed was their local host/guide. From their accents, it was apparent the children were born and schooled in Britain; their conversation revealed they were Christians, and they were looking forward to their visit to Museum of Natural History.

As the train rolled out of the station, the light-hearted conversation was driven by the local host, who was intent on questioning the children's Christian faith. The question, *How do you know what is real?*, set them off. One child replied, *Something is real when I can see, touch, feel and taste it.* The local host then asked, *Dinosaurs are not real, because you cannot see, touch, feel or taste them!*

The childlike simplicity which only children have, one of them replied, *They are real because God made them!*, to which the man asked, *How do you know God made them?*

This banter went on; on the one hand I was trying to read a book, on the other I was eavesdropping on an interesting conversation, and my concentration was interrupted when I heard the words, "evil" and "satan". *So, who made satan?*, asked the host. Through the remainder of the 45-minute journey, the man badgered the children, *You have not yet told me, who made satan!*, until the train pulled into its destination and the eldest of the three children, wagging her finger at the host responded, *Our mother knows everything and she will answer your question!*

As we drew into our destination station and I prepared to put away my book, I read a sentence, which tied in with the conversation I was eavesdropping: *Jesus was the most lonely, at the start of His ministry (during*

the temptation in the Judean wilderness), and at the end of His ministry on earth (at His trial and crucifixion).

In the Judean desert, satan separated Jesus for the world and badgered Him to surrender to his demands; then, three years later, the authorities and the crowds separated Jesus from His family and disciples, demanding His death. On both occasions, in His loneliness, Jesus drew on the authority of His Father in Heaven; the three children on the train were similarly isolated into a corner where, unable to answer the question their host was repeating, in exasperation they said, *Mummy knows everything; she will answer you!*

We often think of loneliness as being alone in a room, without friends or family; a feeling of being, **not wanted**. Nobody loves me; if they did, they would be here with me, right now. But loneliness is much, much more.

Psychiatrists agree that loneliness is the single biggest problem in our world today, and the "me" generation has fed loneliness. Loneliness has many expressions. Many years ago, Narola and I attended a marriage enrichment weekend and heard the term, **married singles**, married couples who live together in one home and have children together, but their lives are so busy, they are "married singles". They comfort themselves with the idea, quality time together is better than quantity time, and too much quantity time could result in "familiarity breeding contempt".

As we delve into Lent, the thought that *Jesus was the most lonely, at the start of His ministry, during the temptation in the Judean wilderness, and at the end of His ministry on earth, at His trial and crucifixion,* strikes home.

The gospel writer Luke starts with Jesus' baptism, at which God affirmed Him with the words, *You are my Son whom I dearly love! With you I am well pleased!* He then writes, *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil (4:1-13).*

Armed with the strength of God, the Holy Spirit led Jesus to meet God's enemy, the person Jesus had come to confront. Satan thought he would either distract Jesus through temptation, or finish Him at the cross, but he did not understand God's plan beyond the cross. Satan is consumed with three things which define his world: bread (*food*), crown (*the pride of life*) and temple (*religion*).

Satan thinks, *If I can isolate the Son of God from His Father, He will be deprived of Daddy's protection. In that loneliness, He will do what I ask Him. I can make this Son of God accept the three things in this world, over which I have influence: economics (bread/food), politics (crown) and religion. Satan thinks to himself, I have successfully isolated people from the laws of God, and they accept the society I have created based on economics, politics and religion.*

When isolated from God, satan tempts Jesus with an alternate structure of life itself. *You don't need God and His laws, His promise of eternal life with Him, which frankly, no one now knows will ever happen; I have an alternate life to offer you **here and now**. Bow down and worship me! Acknowledge me as your provider, and all I have, is yours!*

Let's unpack what satan offered Jesus when he isolated Him in the desert of Judea.

Knowing food is a basic human need, and hunger is a very strong craving, satan invites Jesus to turn stones into bread. Satan operates on the principle, there isn't enough food to go around, so use what you can!

But God's economy is not based on scarcity, insufficiency and shortage; God's economy is based on abundance and the assurance of abundance. Jesus demonstrated this when He fed a crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children, on a hillside. Jesus did not turn grass and into salad, not did he turn stones into bread. Jesus used the meal of one family, two fish and five loaves of bread, to feed 15,000 people!

Not only is God's economy is based on abundance and the assurance of abundance, Jesus is ***the bread that gives life***. He declared, *My Father is the one who gives you the true bread from heaven. And the bread that God gives is the one who came down from heaven to give life to the world. ... I am the bread that gives life!* No one who comes to me will ever be hungry. No one who has faith in me will ever be thirsty (John 6:32-35).

We learn two things about the the Kingdom of God.

First, it is a kingdom of abundance, and God does not hold anything back. It is yours to have and to enjoy!

Second, you don't have to do anything to earn God's abundance; it is yours because in Christ, all your needs are met. Jesus is revealed as the bread of life which we celebrate at the table of communion, remembering Jesus surrendered His body, broken free from death and restored to Heaven. You don't have to turn stones into bread; God's abundance of bread is yours to enjoy.

Satan next offers Jesus a crown. Satan knows he can never be King because God is King, but he wants the power of being king-maker! ***I will give you all the kingdoms of the world, if you bow down and worship me!***

Satan reveals his ignorance of God. He thinks people need to be controlled and subdued by the politics of domination and coercion, of might-is-right. In God's kingdom, there is no power-play: God's power and His strength is available to us in our weakness.

Finally, satan offers Jesus the opportunity to be a part of his religious system. During a time when human and child sacrifice was widespread, where innocent people and children were sacrificed to appease an imaginary God who hungered for, and delighted in human sacrifice, satan offers Jesus the opportunity to jump of the highest tower on the Temple, to sacrifice Himself, and because He was the beloved Son of God, surely God would send His angels to rescue Him!

Hundreds of years before, God spoke through the prophet Hosea, *I desire mercy (and compassion), not sacrifice; my greatest desire is that you know me and acknowledge me! I don't want your burnt offerings! (6:6)*

The world has not changed. The temptations we face still focus on the same three things: the economics of feeding and looking after yourself, the politics of grabbing power for yourself and to control others, and to worship religion, not God!

Towards the turn of the first century, John the Disciple who was the closest to Jesus, summed up the lesson learned from Jesus' temptation, *Do not love the world or the things in the world. Anyone who loves the world, the love of the Father is not in them. All that is in the world—the cravings of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions—these are not from*

the Father, but from the world. This world system and the desires it causes, all these will pass away, but whoever does the will of God, lives with Him for ever.
(1John 2:15-17)

Lent is the perfect time to reflect on, and prepare to celebrate our **belonging** in the family of God. We live in a world tormented by pain, pain of disease, pain of broken relationships, pain of shattered dreams, pain of loss (a loved one, a material possession...); pain is all around us.

Pain is made worse when loneliness separates us from those whom we trust, whose support we depend on, but cannot get when we need it!

When human beings fail us, many of us blame God, *Where is God when I need Him?!*

Ironically, **it is God who feels abandoned, not us!** God feels abandoned and lonely because we do not spend time with Him, we do not draw on His resources! God invites us to enjoy His kingdom of abundance; He does not coerce or bully us into a relationship with Him, yet we find it difficult to believe Him, and we find it difficult to trust Him.

When we read the Gospels, we find Jesus' main mission on earth was to show us how distorted and inaccurate our understanding of God had become, and the distortions and misunderstanding about God has become worse. In His teachings, Jesus clears our false impressions and wrong ideas about God, and opens the way for us to relate to God, the way God intended, from first creation!

The lesson we learned last Sunday was that we **belong** in the family of God, and the lesson we take home today is, God not us, feels abandoned, excluded and lonely, when we do not trust Him to answer prayer, when

we do not turn to Him in our time of need, when we do not take up the offer the resources at His disposal. Let's set the record straight: God has not abandoned us; we have abandoned Him!

Like the three children on the train, when life corners us and we feel isolated and alone, unable to answer the questions life throws at us, we can stand up and say with confidence, *My mummy knows everything! She will explain it.*

Or, as Jesus explained, *My Father in Heaven knows your every need; His abundance is sufficient for you!* (summary of Matthew 6-7).

May God bless each one of you with the abundance of His kingdom and the assurance of this abundance, as you learn to trust Him and walk with Him.

AMEN.