

The rhythm of the church calendar continues, and we have arrived at Lent, the 40 days the Christian Church sets aside before Easter for repentance and reflection. This week, the Old and New Testament readings plunge us into the heart of Jewish traditions. In the Jewish tradition, children were taught to read and memorise the books of the Law, the Torah, which set out the way of life they were expected to follow. And, as they grew older, they were taught the next stage, the *midrashim*, which provided explanation and application of the laws and stories in the Torah. *Midrashim* was done in two ways: *haggadah* which was telling stories, and *halakah*, which was discussion and debate about how best to interpret and apply the laws found in the Torah. We have examples of both in our readings today.

The reading from the Christian Scriptures of Jesus in the wilderness is an example of *halakah* - how best to interpret and apply the books of the Law. I am indebted to John Squires for the following reflection on the Gospel reading of Jesus in the wilderness (<https://johnsquires.wordpress.com>). Rather than episodes of temptation, John places this more in the context of a trial, with the person on trial facing an accuser. 'The back and forth between the person on trial - Jesus - and the person charged with testing and probing his case - the accuser - is couched entirely in terms of sacred scripture. Each time an accusation is put before Jesus, the accuser quotes a passage of scripture. And each time the person on trial - Jesus - responds, another text from sacred scripture is quoted. This was a very Jewish way of getting to the heart of things by one posing a proposition and then another arguing back in counter-proposition, adding additional scripture passages into the argument, in a process that refined, sharpened, and clarified the intent of the initial scripture text. So, he suggests, this episode wasn't an attempt by 'the devil' to get Jesus to misbehave badly, or to succumb to unrighteous behaviour. Rather, this was the way that ancient Jews sought to crystallise the issue and define key matters of faith and life. That's what was going on for Jesus during those 40 days in the wilderness - a crystallisation of his mission.

As an aside, much could be said about the propensity of some in the local and global church to use Scripture in an adversarial way, to offer Scripture as isolated proof-texts to win an argument rather than commit to *discern together* the intent of Scripture, to crystallise issues and define key matters of faith and life. All done with humility, seeking the greater truth. More's the pity when we see how fractured mission becomes with antagonistic, adversarial approaches.

The reading from Deuteronomy is an example of *haggadah*, the storytelling mode in the *midrashim* tradition. The storytelling tradition was able to keep alive memories that might otherwise have been lost, that pointed to a deeper reality. In today's reading, the Israelites recounted the narrative of their ancestors, through the initial **homelessness of their ancestors** ("A wandering Aramean was my father"); **their migration to Egypt** ("lived there as an alien, strangers in a land not their own"); **their suffering there** ("treated us harshly and afflicted us"); **their cry to God for redemption** ("we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors"); **their redemption out of enslavement** ("the Lord brought us out of Egypt"); **and their settling into a fertile land** ("flowing with milk and honey"). As they told the story, they recalled that theirs was a story of powerlessness and punishment in a foreign land, rescue and escape to freedom, movement and migration. Each Israelite was to recount the story of God's saving actions as if it was their own. Jesus and his family would have recounted the story. Jewish people today recount the story. The story would be told again and again to affirm identity and a sense of belonging, embraced by God **Remember who you are and where you are from, and God's saving actions and faithfulness.**

There is something puzzling in the liturgy. It begins with the words, *A wandering Aramean was my father...* Aram was the name the Israelites gave to Syria. on the NE border of the land the Israelites had come to occupy. More particularly, the territory around modern day Aleppo, Syria. The Arameans were considered enemies of Israel. So it is surprising that someone from a tribal group considered to be an enemy was named as one of the ancestors in the community's story. Having an Aramean ancestor was a questionable matter, especially at a time when the community's identity was being defined - who 'we' are, and what was 'other', who was in and who was out.

Scholars have their theories on who the 'wandering Aramean' is. Perhaps it referred to Abraham, who wandered as a stranger and resident alien. He was the quintessential Hebrew who came from beyond the river Euphrates (*Joshua 24:2*), the beneficiary of the covenant promise. He is the one who was told (*Genesis 15:13-16*) "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not their own, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years...And they shall come back here [to the promised land of Canaan] in the fourth generation...". Abraham was considered the father of God's people and would be the one through whom the House of David would be built, culminating in the long awaited Messiah. When Abraham's son Isaac wished to find a wife, he returned to Aram. As did his grandson Jacob, for his two wives. (*Gen 24:10, 28:2*).

Perhaps the wandering Aramean was Jacob the trickster, fickle on the one hand and a faithful man of God on the other hand. After he had cheated his brother, he made a life for himself in Aram, and then was forced to flee and flee again, a great famine driving him and his family into Egypt, then living with political oppression and slavery that led them into the wilderness before entering their Promised Land.

Or perhaps the phrase represents the patriarchs generally. Or perhaps it was Laban, an Aramean, father to Rachel and Leah, and Jacob's cunning and manipulative father in law. (*Genesis 31:10*)

Whoever it referred to, when the Israelites claimed the wandering Aramean as the source of their community identity, it demanded considerable humility to recognise 'the other' was embedded in their community identity.

The term '*wandering*' was also potent. It carried with it meanings such as poor, fearful, starving, destitute, threatened, in danger of perishing, rootless, landless, lost, and victims of nations and peoples far more powerful than they. Whether the ancestor was Abraham, Jacob or Laban, all with their own chequered history, the wandering Aramean represented the humanness and vulnerability of the people - in danger of perishing, being lost. Humility and gratitude was the only genuine response the people could adopt for worship, and a dependence on God's grace and mercy because God had been faithful to them.

But, even then, it was not enough simply to know the history, nor enough merely to recount the story in worship. The people had to offer a gift back to God, the first fruits of the land. And, as well, the people were mandated to ensure the welfare of the strangers in the land: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Ex. 23:9*). The Hebrew Scriptures (*Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 10:17-19; 24:17-18*) specifically required people to extend compassion, love, welcome, and seek justice for the foreigners who sought shelter in their land, because Israel carried the memory that they had once been aliens in Egypt. So, after reciting the story of God's deliverance of his people from slavery as foreigners in Egypt, the Israelites were instructed to set aside a tithe so that the basic needs of the powerless among them could be met - the foreigners and immigrants, the orphans, the widows, the Levites. God wanted the Israelites to remember that it was God's grace that had brought them from their ancestors' desperation to where they were now, so that in turn they would extend grace to others who came as foreigners into the land, those who came after the Israelites had claimed and settled on the land as their own, taken from the indigenous peoples of the land. Something to think about in our own time and place.

The ancient Israelite liturgy, and the moral imperative to show compassion and generosity to the poor and vulnerable, were instructive to the people to keep focussed on their identity arising out of their relationship with God. Through a different set of circumstances, Jesus' encounter in the wilderness served to focus his identity as the beloved of God, and his mission in the world. In Luke's Gospel, the wilderness experience is immediately followed by the story of Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me; I have been anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Jesus' mission was crystal clear.

In this season of Lent, we make space for reflection and may ask ourselves, What is the story I might recount of God as part of my life journey? What is God calling me to do, and be? How might I join in with what God is doing in the world - practically, financially, prayerfully? How can I be a channel of God's blessing to the vulnerable and the marginalized, and show compassionate care to others? May this Lenten journey be a time of spiritual growth for you. May it be so. Amen.