

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK; 18/2/2024
LENT 1A: MK1:9-15:
OUTWARD BOUND AND THE NEED FOR WILDERNESS

During the Second World War the Blue Funnel Merchant Navy Line in England was concerned that, whenever their ships had been torpedoed, the older men were surviving in the life rafts but the younger men were dying. This made no sense, as the younger men were supposedly fitter and stronger than the old-timers. So the company commissioned Kurt Hahn, an educator who himself had fled the Nazis and had taken refuge in Scotland, to investigate the reasons for this paradox and to devise a training programme to combat it. That Programme is now known as *Outward Bound* and has become a training organization in many countries around the world. Many of you will know that many schools, including Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School, have been sending students on *Outward Bound* for many years, and I, as a former chaplain managed to be enriched by 8 expeditions!

Kurt Hahn recognized that the young people of his day (and those on the lifeboats) suffered from six so called *Declines*. It was these *Declines* that made the difference between the generations.

He concluded that due to the fast pace of modern life (remember he was writing in the 1940s) the young suffered from a:

1. *Decline of Fitness due to modern methods of locomotion [moving about];*
2. *Decline of Initiative and Enterprise due to the widespread disease of spectatoritis;*
3. *Decline of Memory and Imagination due to the confused restlessness of modern life;*
4. *Decline of Skill and Care due to the weakened tradition of craftsmanship;*
5. *Decline of Self-discipline due to the ever-present availability of stimulants and tranquilizers;*

And worst of all:

1. *Decline of Compassion due to the unseemly haste with which modern life is conducted or as William Temple called "spiritual death".*

Hahn not only pointed out the decline of modern youth, he also came up with four antidotes to fix the problem.

1. *Fitness Training* (e.g., to compete with one's self in physical fitness; in so doing, train the discipline and determination of the mind through the body)
 2. *Expeditions* (e.g., via sea or land, to engage in long, challenging endurance tasks)
 3. *Projects* (e.g., involving crafts and manual skills)
 4. *Rescue Service* (e.g., surf lifesaving, fire fighting, first aid)
- (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Hahn#Six_Declines_of_Modern_Youth)

Formalizing the antidotes, Hahn founded *Outward Bound*, *The Duke of Edinburgh Award* and the *Round Square Association* (to which BCGS belongs).

Hahn hit on the idea that it was time in the wilderness, on an expedition would be an antidote to the declines of modern youth.

And so, he devised *Outward Bound* to be an expedition longer than a week, taken at walking speed where no lollies, alcohol, drugs, coffee or tea are allowed, with a group of others engaged in challenging skill and community building activities.

Hahn's original courses for the Merchant Navy were on land. Initially he was criticized for this, but as sailors began to survive their ship-wrecks his ideas were seen to have merit.

Hahn's, major concern was that the youth lacked compassion. His antidote was to slow their pace of life and put them with a group of strangers. The young, he noted, were too busy to care and without learning how to care they could not survive. He saw a direct link between busy-ness and lack of compassion.

It was the wilderness experience which would be the great teacher.

I've witnessed this first hand. I've seen fit 16 year old boys striding out ahead of the hiking group leaving the petite, feet blistered struggling girls behind saying "*They need to walk faster.*" Equally, I've seen the confident, well-spoken girls laughing at the boys struggling to express their inner most feelings during group sessions.

Curiously, when the group members are not caring for one another, the wise instructors slow the pace down! "We have ways and means of making you care!"

Isn't it interesting that Hahn's idea, is exactly what happened to Jesus in the wilderness. It's as if Jesus, as a youth needed the wilderness experience to become truly human.

And so I come to today's Gospel reading.

Mk's account of Jesus' temptation, unlike Mtt and Lk, is very short. Mk summarizes the whole 40 days in two sentences:

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13 and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mk 1:12-13, NRSV)

There are no details of the temptations we are familiar with in the other Gospels. There are possible reasons for this, but I like to think that for Mk, the idea of Jesus being a young man in the wilderness, before taking on adult responsibilities, was familiar to his readers. What happened did not need to be spelt out because the first hears of this story had been in the wilderness themselves. Many of them had had deliberate exposure to the wild.

It was common, and still is today, especially amongst indigenous cultures, for adolescents to be taken away into the wilderness for a form of initiation ceremony into adulthood. The early Christians would have known about this. These ceremonies are particularly designed to prepare young men and women for the hard realities of adulthood. Often, hardship and pain are used to test them, not in any cruel way, but to teach the lesson of compassion. They also challenge the individual to find their Spiritual side. Pain makes the point that all experience pain. And pain in oneself, if managed properly, brings compassion for others...

Sadly, I don't think we "initiate" our young people very well these days. Initiation has become passing the y12 exams, getting a driver's licence, surviving Leavers and maybe having your first alcoholic drink! I think we can do we can do better than this! (Bye the way that's why school like BCGS send students on Outward Bound. It's also why the church used to have a period of Confirmation).

So, pain can bring out humanity in us for the better. But not always. Pain can also make us bitter, unreasonable, or demanding. These are the nature of Jesus' temptations. Evil would have him "short cut" the wilderness experience. Evil would have Jesus become bitter, or unreasonable or demanding. Evil's way would be to stunt his compassionate heart and to blind him the cause of the broken hearted.

But Jesus must go through the wilderness. Without the wilderness, Jesus would not know our wilderness. Without wilderness, where temptations are very real, Jesus would not know our temptation. And without wilderness we would have little confidence in our Saviour's ability.

Here's the thing; we all know pain.

What pain are you experiencing now? If there's none, then well and good, but I suspect you havn;t slowed down enough. Surely all of us have at least a small ache over what is happening in Gaza right now.

Is this pain binding you up, poisoning your relationships, or making you bitter? If so you are probably attempting an unworkable short-cut. This is the way of temptation. One the other hand, the wilderness way of Jesus is the way of compassion. We slow down, to the compassionate pace of God. We begin to realise that our ache, is not just for us, but also for all of us. Our ache beomes God's compassion at work in us. This is wilderness work.

But we must remember, we do not do this out of our own strength. Jesus is at work, he has known the wilderness and survived; we go not alone.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.