

**Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13**

## **Testing our Neuroses: Reshaping Desire**

### **Introduction**

Last week, Sunday of the Transfiguration, we read the story of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, on the mountain, with a number of apostles – most notably Peter. As we read together, we discovered that the Transfiguration is about the meeting of heaven and earth, as the Celts put it, “a thin space” where we gain insight – if we search for it – into ourselves, society, the world and God.

Today, in the first Sunday of Lent, we continue this idea of the priority of gaining insight. In the story, Jesus, repairs to the high desert lands of Palestine – the thin spaces - to clarify his values, his purpose, his life. In so doing, he attempts to understand the forces that assail him and what goes on inside him: the relationship between the two. At its most basic, Jesus is dealing with the question of desire, and the challenge to reshape, to train, to mould, to hone his conflicting ambitions, aspirations and yearnings.

Let's begin our thought journey this morning by referring to this question of desire. Then turn to the Gospel reading and finally to the Christian spiritual tradition: three steps.

### **Desire**

Earlier in the service, we heard some insights about desire from a range of people. The ancient philosopher, Plato, the British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the contemporary Christian monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, and going back a-ways, Ignatius of Loyola; all agree that desire is fundamental to the way we live: to the decisions we make, to the values we embrace, to the way we treat people and to the way we see the world. This is part of the point of the movie *Chocolat*. At its root, it is about the sheer power of desire in shaping – often twisting – individuals and whole communities. In short desire is a power for good or ill, for life or death. Set in a pretty, insular French rural village, established Christianity is of little help in mentally and emotionally opening the community up. The neurotic fear of the outsider, already well established through geographical isolation, is only exacerbated by a parochial and sequestered traditionalist Catholicism – it could equally be Protestantism - which dreads difference and becomes complicit in the violence of the town towards Vianne and her apparent Bohemian friends. But if that is not enough, the violent desire is also expressed internally, between man and woman, husband and wife. Our clip, begins with the flight of Josephine, the abused wife of Serge, to Vianne's chocolate shop, for safety. The all-powerful mayor, the Comte de Reynaud, a force to be reckoned with, intervenes seeking to resolve the situation, but he does so in the only way that he can imagine, the only way that the people know: the imposition of church doctrine, more 'Christian' rules and regulations, that have been responsible in their own way, for the violent narrowness and sectarianism from the very beginning. What we see in this story is the way historical structures and attitudes, village and church, twist, contort and impoverish desire for sound, healthy relationships in and beyond the town. It is if no-body takes the time out to “breathe”, to think in new ways. It is an asphyxiated community...starved by its unquestioning and unquestioned tradition.

### **The Reading: The Temptations**

Turning to the Gospel, the issue of desire, underscored by Plato, Hobbes, Merton, Ignatius...and...*Chocolat*, finds a central place in Jesus' experience in the thin spaces of the deserts. Without desire, Jesus cannot function. Desire provides the drive, the energy, the power for living. Without desire, nothing can happen. But right from the word go, the challenge presented by Satan, is this: to distort Jesus' desire, to disturb, to disorient his centre-of-gravity, through

elevating his anxiety: “*If you are the Son of God, then...show it, demonstrate it!*”. In short, Satan plays psychological games, goading, inciting Jesus to embark on a never-ending struggle to satiate, to gratify his self-doubt, to usurp God, to ‘build’ the Kingdom on his own terms, to become the neurotic slave of his own *unquenchable* desire. And, ultimately, as is inevitably the case, to make others its victim. *Are you, can you?*

### **The Exercises**

This question, this psychological question, this spiritual question, this practical question, of reshaping my desire, so I can actually do what God asks of me, is not all that easy: since it requires an honest acknowledgement of the problem of anxiety, and then a discipline for its solution.

Ignatius of Loyola, understood this problem of desire and the need to reshape it, if we were to be serious about being Christian. A psychologist, theologian and ethicist before his time, he developed what became known as the Spiritual Exercises. In short, they are a tool for helping us discern what God wants of us, what the problems are in my own make-up, that block the way.

Two things that stand out in his analysis of reality and the human being are worth noting. The first is this: that evil itself, seldom, if ever appears obviously to us. Through the metaphor, the image of the “Serpent’s tail”, Ignatius points out the understated-ness, the subtlety of evil, the way in which it parades itself under the guise, the appearance of moral good. Let’s be clear, most evil *is* done in the name of goodness, love or justice. We rationalize things, we justify, we excuse, we explain away. And how much more when those evils are done by whole groups of people: communities, classes, cultures, power groups.

The second thing, is that we ourselves need to be acutely aware of what Ignatius called our “disordered attachments” (*afecciones desordenadas*): to put it another way, the need to be conscious of our own very real subjective weaknesses. Among them, he notes, three things: the preoccupation with being honoured by others, the possession of things that own us *rather* than we owning them, and the unappeasable desire for self-interest.

Ignatius understands, is absolutely clear...as we should be...that we cannot possibly serve the Kingdom and its loving justice, if our unreconstructed desires dominate us. If we are ‘screwed up’ on the inside, anything we do on the outside will be, can only be destructive. In the end, we are to constantly ask these three questions as a therapeutic way to channel, to correct our desires:

*What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What shall I do for Christ?*