

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran on Lent 1 2005 at S. Julian of Norwich, Ballajura.
(Based on Matthew 4:1-11)

The absence of flowers from the liturgical space in Lent was designed to emphasise the solemnity of Lent, Lent's penitential nature. So instead of staring at bright daises or laughing sunflowers, congregations are invited to look at the vacant space, the absence of flowers, and think solemn thoughts.

I think, however, that there is a plant that is particularly Lenten and that could decorate the liturgical space. The shrub Lantana resonates with Lent, especially with the notion of wilderness as in the gospel for Lent 1.

I have always had this ambivalence about Lantana. Here in Mediterranean Perth, people grow Lantana in pots, like a small shrub. Whereas in Central Queensland where I lived for many years, you have to hack Lantana back before it strangles you! Indeed, that was one of my first tasks when we moved with two young children into a rectory in Rockhampton - to cut back a massive growth of Lantana to let the sunlight bathe our back garden.

My father-in-law who served in the army in New Guinea in the Second World War positively hates Lantana, for it was jungle-like there, with its piercing spikes and tangled, matted undergrowth. It was a soldier's adversary as he tried to avoid the enemy.

Now this is not the occasion for me to become a Don Burke and to lecture on plants and gardens. But Lantana and Lent seem strangely intertwined. Let me explain.

One of the most disturbing and engaging of Australian films in the past few years was a movie called Lantana. It was a superb mystery that kept me on the edge of my seat. It is now available on video and DVD and worth a viewing.

The movie begins with the grizzly discovery of a woman's body in the matted, pain-injecting undergrowth of wild Lantana scrub. The Lantana scrub functions as a metaphor throughout this film for the intertwined, matted, prickly and pain-giving desires in the lives of the various interconnected characters

One American reviewer wrote of this Australian film

Lantana argues that inertia may be the natural state of the human condition. Sometimes, only a tragedy of significant magnitude has the power to shake us out of our state of slumber, and, in some cases, even that may not be enough. Being alive and living are not the same. Life and existence, while interrelated, are not synonymous.

These are points that Lantana brings to the surface and embraces. Through the characters, the film shows that many humans, once happiness has evaporated, move through life in a stupor - people so easily embrace comfortable routines, giving up any hope of leading dynamic lives and instead becoming reactive.

What constitutes happiness - is it the presence of pleasure or the absence of pain? What is the strongest foundation for a lasting marriage - trust, love, familiarity, or grief?¹

Lantana, that dreadfully matted scrub when tropically grown-wild, is a metaphor for the tangled nature of human desire that we experience most acutely in love and relationships. In fact, as the story of the film Lantana suggests, people can get lost within their desires, just as people can become lost when trying to navigate through overgrown Lantana shrubbery.

Lent and Lantana.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness dealing with desire is a classic story for all Christians. Indeed, that is the way Matthew treats this story. Matthew tells the stories he does about Jesus not simply to provide a

¹ James Berardinelli. 2002. see: <http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/l/lantana.html>

form of biography or diary or travelogue, but rather to address the issues facing members of his own community. Matthew uses the incidents in the life of Jesus to reinforce for his church what it is like to a people who live the Kingdom of God now, who 'thirst for righteousness'.

It is clear from Matthew's story of Jesus' temptations that similar temptations were throwing the lives of his church members around, creating spiritual turbulence, as they sought to deal with their conflicted desires -for God and for the world. As the gospel extract for Ash Wednesday ended, 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'. Matthew's community had discovered that their treasure was spread over several portfolios.

A spiritual barometer from the Sermon on the Mount is the question - where is your heart? If you can locate the fascination of your heart, you have located what is treasure for you.

Matthew's community was perplexed by questions of the political and material costs of belonging to the community. Are these our questions?

What are the costs of being Christian nowadays? Our community is largely indifferent to the Church, except for the occasional lampooning, but what is the cost when we stand for justice, mercy, inclusion, forgiveness, compassion, alignment with the left out, maximum rather than minimum standards of morality, and self-forgetfulness?

We can feel aliens within our own society and we can never underestimate the influence upon us of the wider, more numerous group who seem so different from our own standards and values. We can feel isolated, quite alone, as if life has become horribly matted, intertwined and prickly, like Lantana bush.

Matthew's community felt huge external pressures upon them. This is part of the complex context in which Matthew shapes the teaching of Jesus. As we progress through Matthew's gospel, we will find many likenesses to our own context.

The most significant issue, however, is the state of our own desires. This is the substance of the Temptation stories.

The Temptations of Jesus disclose what is Jesus' deepest desire. This disclosure is about what fuels Jesus' life, what gives him purpose, meaning and cohesion. The deepest desire of Jesus, the very centre of his being, was to do the will of his Father. Indeed, in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of this desire as 'his meat and drink'.² In other words, being obedient to the Father, being synonymous with the Father is the very substance of Jesus' life, his deepest self.

Attention to our own desires will allow us to encounter our deepest self.³ We must distinguish between whims and desires. Desires are our sources of energy and motivation, what drive us in our lives. Whims are flimsy, passing interests, that might distract us momentarily but do not give purpose to our lives.

Desires require us to reflect upon ourselves, to go inwards, to uncover our persistent longings. The Jesuit, Philip Sheldrake, has written about the spirituality of desire. Sheldrake makes these points:

- 1) desire is intimately associated with our capacity to love truly - ourselves, other people, God and even more abstract things such as ideals or causes.
- 2) desires are best understood as our most honest experiences of ourselves, in all our complexity and depth, as we relate to people and things around us.

² See John 4:34.

³ Philip Sheldrake. 1994. Befriending our Desires. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p. ix.

One difficulty for most of us most of the time is that we give little attention to our desires. We think we do. We think that we act upon what we really want. However, the sadness is that we are mostly reacting to surface needs because we have not drilled down into the core of our being and detected our deep desires. We mostly live, I fear, lives of distraction rather than lives of attention.

The Temptations of Jesus indicate Jesus being attentive to the core of his being, to his deepest desires. Hence, the long period, the biblical period of 40 days and 40 nights. Such solitude in silence except for his own inner voice enabled Jesus to encounter in an invigorating way his deepest desire - 'it is my meat and drink', as he later said to his disciples, 'to do the will of him who sent me'.⁴ Jesus in the gospels plunges into his ministry directly after the Temptations. Jesus knows who he is and what is his great desire, what is his true delight.

The Temptations story uses its own imagery that would have spoken into the people of that first-century culture. I suggest the image of the Lantana bush -overgrown, matted, almost impenetrable, scratchy, painful as you plunge in and out of it - as an image for contemporary Australians searching for their deepest desire.

This is what Lent is really about -encountering our deepest desires, moving deeper than our surface whims and wants, to the core of who we are. Philip Shelldrake notes that
our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep wells of our being where the longing for God runs freely. This is so even if the desires are not always expressed in explicitly religious terms.⁵

The film Lantana is not an explicitly religious film, but it deals with the human condition and is therefore implicitly religious. Any exploration of what it is to be human touches the religious dimension. So that film Lantana is very Lenten for it uses Australian characters to uncover the nature and strength of desire.

As the American reviewer noted
being alive and living are not the same. Life and existence, while interrelated, are not synonymous.

The intensity of our desires will tell us how alive we are. The substance of our desires will tell us how deeply we are living, for 'being alive and living are not the same'.

Living deeply this Lent, meeting temptations and moving beyond them to your real desires, might be similar spiritually to plunging through overgrown Lantana bush. We will find there our most honest selves.

⁴ See John 4:34

⁵ Philip Shelldrake. 1994. op.cit. p. 14.