

I spent much of last week out in the bush at the Year 7 camp. The camp of course, is primarily for the benefit of students but we are all learners.

It had been a busy Monday and I spent quite a bit of time preparing work for classes I would leave behind. My packing therefore was not of the best. I confess that I hadn't read my packing list, lovingly provided by Mrs Holbrook, with sufficient care. Tuesday morning was very wet and I left in a scramble.

Upon arrival, I soon realised there were things I had left behind. My first thought was to ring home and get my daughter to take them to a member of staff joining us on the second day. Then I thought better of it. I had quite sufficient, more than sufficient in fact, and what I hadn't brought I would do without. After all, we live with far too much and our lives are too often cluttered by the excesses, moderate or in moderate, that too easily obscure what is most important.

This has been the theme of our reflections in school chapel in the past fortnight as we begin the season of Lent. My camp experience was part of the realisation that in a small way it would be healthy to practise what I was preaching. Even then, I had taken far too much. Small matter that I had left behind my razor, deodorant and shampoo. Perhaps, I thought, my face, my hair and those other affected parts of me may benefit from a brief respite from the bombardment of the chemicals that are their daily experience.

The other, less unexpected piece of learning in my week came from the boys themselves. As I watched them become a group, each one had his challenges to face. There were those who had their own sense of fear, loneliness and stood on the fringe, reluctant to join in even when encouraged. There were the self-appointed leaders who had to discover that perhaps they did not have everything it takes to solve every problem and to make every decision. There were the talkers who needed to get their mouth into neutral and their ears and their minds into gear so as to become listeners. And there were those with the classic strength of the quiet natural leader who had to find a way to insinuate themselves into the confidence of the group and coax them into becoming followers.

As I watched them, a phrase from a familiar prayer kept coming back to me. It was a prayer I first encountered 20 years ago when I visited Newcastle Grammar School and sat at the back of their chapel during a service. This prayer says many things but in the middle is one line that has resonated again and again ever since.

*Help us daily to conquer ourselves.*

How powerfully it serves as a constant reminder of the challenge to us as human beings and in our Christian journey. There are countless impediments to human perfection. The struggle with all sorts of things -- to find patience in our dealings, to place the needs of others before our own, to manage our addictions and obsessions in things large and small (I was reminded during the camp of how unused I have become to drinking tea out of anything but a cup with a bone china lip. I don't see it as a mortal sin, but in the scale of things I should be grateful that I have tea at all, let alone abundant clean fresh water to

make it with). Sometimes we are addicted to work and push aside other priorities that are less justifiable in the modern world view.

Our gospel reading [Luke 12:13-21] reminds us not just about wealth, but more about priority. There is nothing really wrong with wealth or any of the things that get in the way. What is wrong is our attitude and approach towards them. It is a question of striking the right balance, of setting the right priorities and sticking to them. And however much we may seek to blame others for this or that, the heart of the matter lies very much in how we manage ourselves.

My four days in the wilderness took me back not only to that line in a prayer, but to what our Lenten journey is all about. It is a reminder of Jesus' own journey to Good Friday and Easter Day. He, too, went into the wilderness and did without so that he too could get fit to conquer himself, to be ready to give away much more than we are ever asked to give.

In his perfection, our imperfection is powerfully plain. But for us too the bright light of Easter day brings all our failures, all our honest but flawed attempts to conquer ourselves will be made new in the radiant light of Easter morning.

But let us not just depend on that. God wants us to keep trying and, most of the time, so do we. So let our prayer be for the right priorities, for the self-discipline to stick to them, and for thankfulness that in our weakness and failings God will still embrace us. Let us continue to pray: help us daily to conquer ourselves.