

March 2018

Dear Friends

By the time you read this we will be in the middle of Lent, one of the so-called 'Penitential' seasons of the church's year. Traditionally Lent has been a time of fasting and self-examination in preparation for Easter. It has often, in the history of the church, been a time when people have wandered about wearing sackcloth and ashes and thinking of themselves as 'miserable sinners' and having 'no health in them' to quote the Book of Common Prayer, which is still regularly used by choice in many of our churches and is still the default service book when priest and congregation cannot agree.

But Lent can be much more than a time when we beat ourselves up and force ourselves to give up some of the things we love doing, eating, and indulging in, merely for the sake of keeping up with age old traditions.

I have been struggling with inspiration about the subject matter of my letter to you this month and I believe I got it this morning while I was going to, leading, and waiting outside to greet the early morning congregation at Aldringham at the end of the service. Let me explain further.

As I was driving across the fields on the way to the service, I became aware of the mist which was covering the fields on either side of the road. There was something quite ethereal about it and the sun was just rising above it, giving it a magical appearance. I thought nothing more about it and went on to take the service, sharing some thoughts about Lent and its meaning from the gospel for the day, which was in Mark.

As part of the sermon I shared about how Mark spared his readers the details and progressed from incident to incident in rapid succession. In the particular part of the first chapter we were reading he covers the baptism of Christ, the temptations and the beginning of His ministry in 7 verses. But when we look more deeply into what was actually happening, we can see that in His baptism Christ affirmed His humanity by needing to repent and be cleansed from sin just as many others were at that time and as, indeed, we are by faith at our baptism. At the same time God affirmed Jesus' divinity through the appearance of the Spirit and the voice from heaven. This was followed 'immediately' by His being 'sent by the same Spirit into the wilderness for testing'; but God did not desert Him for he sent angels to minister to Him.

The implication of this sequence of events is that Jesus (and we) cannot stay on the mountain top of spiritual experience for ever. We have at some point, just as we heard the previous week in the account of the transfiguration, to come down from the mountain and face the reality of life in the valley. The next couple of verses in Mark's Gospel speak about the launch of Jesus' ministry in His local area. It was as if His experience of the Spirit at His baptism and his grounding through His experience of testing in the wilderness had enabled Jesus to begin His ministry on earth.

Looked at in this context, we need both the mountain top experiences when we feel very close to God, and the wilderness experiences when we almost feel abandoned by Him (although He never leaves us), to fully identify with those to whom we minister both as clergy and laity. We need our Lenten experiences to come to terms with who we really are, and to be enabled to better share God with our neighbours and to feel comfortable in our own skin.

When I got outside the church at almost 9 o'clock, the first thing I was aware of was the frosty grass, the sound of the birds, a few clumps of snowdrops and the sun having risen a little higher in the now blue sky. I found myself thinking that it is no accident that Lent is in the spring for as I looked around me at the vestiges of winter, there were signs of new life, new hope, the beginning of new growth.

Surely this is what Lent is about – not merely a giving up of the things we hold most dear, but also a re-evaluation of ourselves, our relationship with God and a preparation for the New Life in Christ which we celebrate at Easter. May I wish you all a positive Lenten experience.

With love in Christ

Sheila