

## A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

We are now in the earliest days of Lent. Our spiritual journey begins, calling us closer to God as we pray, reflect and contemplate.

It is both a communal season, observed by entire congregations and communities of faith, and a deeply personal one. In her reflection on the season of Lent, Biblical Scholar and Theologian Paula Gooder writes that Lent “brings with it a different challenge to experience and from which to learn. Sometimes the message it holds out for us is gentle, a balm to the soul. Sometimes it is disturbing and unsettling. Sometimes it is uplifting and inspiring; sometimes bleak and unremitting. Each year is different. Each year we need to ask ourselves where the Spirit is driving us this year”.

This question takes some time to consider, as the response can take some time to be made clear, but I pray that we will all make space for such contemplation. These are precious days, as is the journey that now leads us to Holy Week.

We also need to consider the wider world and our place within it, as we are people who are in the world but try not to be of the world. The current geopolitical situation is one which is causing much anxiety and fear, and we are facing a challenge to the very existence of a global community. We face hard work to safeguard the equality of all people and their rights as human beings, and to ensure that hard-won gains are not lost in regression.

But faith spurs us on. It is intended to inspire us. Our faith calls us to care not only for ourselves, but those around us, near and far. It challenges us to dare to rise above selfishness, aggression and human limitation to something greater and which seeks to permit the love of God to resound throughout the world and to guide us.

Scripture is an important tool along the way as we do this work. It can challenge us, guide us, comfort us, and sometimes do all of these at once. What is most important is to engage with it, however it may make us feel.

The passage from the letter to the Romans has one of the most affirming statements of Pauline theology – “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.” From this we learn that Jesus came to offer salvation and reconciliation to all humanity, with no distinction. With

this text there can be no doubt about the equality of all people before God, and we can and should give thanks for those uplifting words.

In addition to human equality before God, there is also divine generosity.

God is generous to us because that is the nature of the God we encounter. There is nothing we do to earn God's love or favour, except believe. It does not take sacrifices or displays of piety or anything else to prove our devotion ... it requires belief in God, simply expressed.

God chooses to love us. That is why God calls us back during this season of Lent. God calls us back to the core of our faith and to the heart of our relationship with God. It is about re-grounding ourselves in a truth we have been shown time and time again in scripture - God is love, and God loves us.

But having God's love surrounding us does not mean that life is going to be entirely smooth sailing or trouble free. Life has times of joy and delight, as well as desolation and sadness. It has moments of celebration, and of difficulty.

In the Gospel passage, we see Jesus face a time of difficulty. Even he faced temptation and worked to overcome it. Jesus wrestles with Satan - that part of himself, and every person - that seeks to yield to those things which separate us from God, distract us from faith, and cause spiritual and emotional damage to ourselves and others. Being human, Jesus also had to face the evil aspects of human nature, but he was able to remain steadfast, and deeply connected to God.

The text begins as Jesus spends time in the wilderness, taking time to retreat after his baptism in the river Jordan. He is tempted during these forty days.

The nature of his temptation is interesting, as they are all connected to deeply human concerns. Being both human and divine, Jesus is affected by human needs (he hungered, got tired, was as emotional as any other person), but his divinity means that he has mastery over such concerns, and that they will not distract him from serving God and guiding humanity back to God.

The first temptation is to yield to his hunger, commanding the stones to become bread to feed his appetite. Jesus rejects this and will not misuse his abilities for self-

interest. He will feed thousands through miracles and sustain them with bread from heaven, but he will not use his divine powers to feed himself alone.

The second is to stoke his ego with earthly power and glory, receiving the praise and adulation of people. Jesus will not turn away from God, but will faithfully serve and proclaim God's wisdom and build up God's kingdom. The crowds that will follow Jesus will come to him naturally, or through being called by him, not in response to a promise of glory and authority. He will not court popularity, but those who have ears to hear and eyes to see will understand and follow him.

The third is to put God to the test, demanding divine intervention in order to save his body from harm. This Jesus flatly rejects with the statement that God shall not be put to the test in some kind of stunt. Ultimately, we cannot expect God to conform to our desires or will. What we can expect is that God does indeed journey with us through life, giving us the wisdom, knowledge and faith to navigate our path to the best of our ability.

My prayer for us, this first Sunday in Lent, is that we will do the spiritual work that Lent asks of us. That we will set aside the time for prayer and contemplation, that we will consider what we might do for those around us to assist them in their journey, and that we might reflect the love God has for us as we do so. It is a precious journey, and worth the effort.

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