

## Sermon Preached at St John the Baptist, Devizes (Matins)

Date: *8<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Lent II)*

First Lesson: *Isaiah 58:3-12*

Second Lesson: *Matthew 25:31-46*

*My brothers and sisters, I would ask you to pray for me that I may speak to you in the name of the living God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

So, how's your Lent going? I know many of us have either given something up for Lent, or are trying to engage in something new, or both. Diana and I have given up alcohol for Lent and we're always aware that, when you're working in a school, this really isn't the ideal time of year to put oneself under extra personal pressure, as all the exam classes start to reach fever pitch and everyone's patience starts to wear a bit thin. This is when the temptation comes to knock it on the head and go back to whatever it is you've given up. After all, if giving things up were such a great thing to do, we'd give them up permanently, right? Not just for a couple of months in the run up to Easter. And if giving things up for a short amount of time is so great, why repeat it every year?

This morning's reading from Isaiah reminds us about the manner in which we should engage in practices like those we follow in Lent. Isaiah obviously doesn't use the word Lent – that's an old Germanic word – but instead refers to fasting, which the Jewish people at the time would have engaged in to express either remorse for sin or thanksgiving for God's gifts to them. Fasting is not universally recommended in Old Testament writings from a similar time<sup>1</sup>, and Isaiah starts by pointing out the hypocrisy it can lead to, as he sees people fighting and disagreeing

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, fasting is implicitly approved of in Joel 1:14 and Ezra 8:21, but not in Zech 8:19.

whilst trying to gain God's favour. Instead, Isaiah tells us what the real meaning and purpose of such practices are, and does so in a manner that you might have noticed Jesus echoing in our second lesson today:

Isaiah: 'Is this not the fast that I choose... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?'<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, via Matthew: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me'<sup>3</sup>

This isn't surprising, really – as an observant Jew, Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, quoted Isaiah many times and, we are told, read from Isaiah in the synagogue<sup>4</sup>. So Isaiah gives us answers – which are echoed by Jesus – to both questions I posed a moment ago: why bother observing Lent at all, let alone year after year?

By giving up something we regard as an indulgence or luxury – chocolate, alcohol, whatever – something that we normally are tempted to use to get ourselves through tough times, we give God a chance to fill the hole left in our lives. We can fill that gap with God through prayer and so better engage in Christlike activity in the world. Isaiah points out that our fast – whatever form it might take – should 'loose the bonds of injustice... let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke'<sup>5</sup>. That means that, in the long run, if our Lenten fasting is to mean anything, if it is to be worthwhile in any meaningful sense, then it must make us less able to shrug our shoulders and say 'well, there's not much I can do about homelessness, or bullying, or modern slavery, or climate change, or the situation in Syria, or... and so it goes on. The world can sometimes seem like an insurmountable mountain of

---

<sup>2</sup> Isa 58:6-7

<sup>3</sup> Jesus's words at Mt 25:35

<sup>4</sup> Lk 4:16-17

<sup>5</sup> Isa 58:6

problems. But Isaiah tells us that true fasting, the fasting required by God, must move us to action, however small or insignificant it might seem.

And why not do it all year round? Well, there's nothing wrong with a little luxury most of the time, and if your Lent is properly productive, there's no reason its positive effects can't outlast the fast.

So, if that's why we observe Lent at all, why repeat it every year? As Isaiah tells us, when we fast properly:

‘The LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden’<sup>6</sup>

And, just as gardens need regular watering, our need for such help is ongoing because we are imperfect and, no matter how good our intentions, we stumble and need picking up and redirecting. That's why it's worth observing Lent each year. Every year, we can use Lent to work a little harder to help God refine our behaviour and thinking little by little, so we constantly improve ourselves, the world around us, and our relationships with others and with God.

A few days ago, Paul read the Robert Herrick poem *To keep a True Lent* as part of his Ash Wednesday sermon, which I found very helpful and which reminded me of several parts of the Isaiah reading. I would like to add to that by offering you the poem *Lent* by George Herbert, two verses of which speak particularly of our imperfections and that we should not let their existence discourage us from trying to engage in a holy Lent:

It's true, we cannot reach Christ's fortieth day;

Yet to go part of that religious way

Is better than to rest:

---

<sup>6</sup> Isa 58:11

We cannot reach our Saviour's purity;  
Yet are bid, *Be holy ev'n as he.*

In both let's do our best.

Who goeth in the way which Christ hath gone,  
Is much more sure to meet with him, than one  
That travelleth by-ways:  
Perhaps my God, though he be far before,  
May turn, and take me by the hand, and more  
May strengthen my decays.

Even if we cannot keep Lent absolutely perfectly, Herbert is telling us, we are much more likely to meet Christ on our journey by trying to tread in his footsteps than by ignoring them altogether.

I once heard someone say that observing Lent was not meant to be an ascetical exercise – that is, discomfort for discomfort's sake – but rather that it was, quite simply, an *offering*. An offering from each of us to God, made in faith with the prayer that God might be able to use it productively in the world. It might be obvious to us how God uses our offering, it might not. Either way, Isaiah suggests what we might expect from making such an offering in the right way:

“your light shall break forth like the dawn... the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard... you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”<sup>7</sup>

I hope that goes some way to helping you continue in your Lenten offering to God.

---

<sup>7</sup> Isa 58:8-9