

Sunday 25th February 2018
Second Sunday of Lent (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 17.1-7,15-16

NT: Romans 4.13-end

G: Mark 8.31-end

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

One morning last week as I drew back the curtains just before 7, there in a chilly, silver sky was a huge red cross. The trails from two planes had been picked up and perfectly lit by the rising sun.

The symmetry could not have been bettered if the Red Arrows had purposely performed such a feat, portraying for all to see the ultimate sign of love and hope for humanity.

It made me smile, it brought to life the words of the Benedictus, said each day at Morning Prayer.

In the tender compassion of our God

the dawn from on high shall break upon us.

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

I'm reading the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for this year. It's entitled 'Say it to God – in Search of Prayer.'

It begins by outlining the difficulty that most of us face most of the time.

How to pray, when to pray, where to pray.

We may feel that we should be able to shut out all the world, quieten down our thoughts, sit completely at peace, perhaps in church or some other holy space, and raise hearts and minds to God.

And sometimes we can.

But often, we might struggle to find the time; and if we do, it can be a bigger struggle to find that inner peace.

We are busy people, our minds are racing with the all the things we've done, the things we need to do.

Just physically sitting still can be an effort, if we're used to being on the go all the time.

The author, Luigi Gioia, tells a story of a Benedictine monk who was imprisoned for years for his faith.

He learnt during that time to use the noise and the squalor and the misery of the prison to fuel his prayer, coming to see that

'Any scrap of wood is good to feed fire.'

His lesson for us is that every aspect of our lives can be an opportunity for prayer. Dashing to another meeting. Waking early to see to a crying child. Queueing in the cold for the bus. These are moments offered to God because God is there with us. He is concerned about every aspect of our lives, He is willing to listen at anytime and he's hoping that at some points in our day, if only for fleeting seconds, we hear and listen to him too.

If any scrap of wood feeds the fire of prayer, imagine the blaze we can feel from the cross.

This is the wood that fuels our faith constantly, this is the key that opens our lives to God, this is the sign that we are loved with a love stronger than death.

We worship in the sailors' church here in Liverpool and it is no co-incidence that the cross hanging there, takes the form of an anchor. But this anchor is for all of us.

The cross is there to hold us steady through any storm we might face. It won't prevent us from experiencing difficult times, times when our faith may feel stretched and thin, times when the worries of this world seem to dominate, times when prayer seems impossible.

But the cross will always anchor us in the kingdom of God, ensuring that we cannot stray far from the place we are meant to be.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Because we see deny and the cross in the same sentence, we tend to think that denial is suffering, that taking up our cross can only mean pain and hardship.

This was true for Jesus, through his taking up of his cross, through his passion and crucifixion, he suffered excruciating pain, he poured out every last drop of blood, he succumbed to horrendous torture. But in doing so he overcame such suffering and death.

To deny ourselves means opening ourselves to the will of God, it means turning from self-indulgence, it means loving God, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Self-indulgence can sound like a good thing. Pleasing yourself, doing whatever takes your fancy, having a good time, however you might define that. But there are only so many holidays you can take, chocolate you can eat, lazing about you can do before it begins to pall. Those things are good precisely because we don't do them all the time.

By denying ourselves, we place ourselves in God's hands, we trust in his love, that he knows what is ultimately best for us, that he has a plan for our lives, the fulfilment of which will bring us to the ultimate happiness of eternal life.

And for us, the cross is no longer a weapon of torture, but an aid to help us on our journey.

Carrying our cross we have a reminder that we are completely loved, that we cannot wander far from our path because we are anchored in that love, that we always carry with us fuel for the fire of our prayer.

We live our whole lives in the presence of our loving Lord and all the moments of our lives can be offered to God in prayer. We do not need to be at peace, kneeling in a warm church, holding a bible.

We don't always need to think happy thoughts or believe that we can only approach God with genuflecting respect.

After all the ultimate prayer came from one man in the blistering heat of the day when his whole body was wracked in unbearable pain and the darkness of death was about to consume him.

My God, my God why have you forsaken me?

Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose