

Sunday 18 February 2024
The First Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 9: 8-17

NT: 1 Peter 3:18-end

Gp: Mark 1:9-15

We are now in Lent. We are in the season that leads from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week and Easter. It's a season that grows in intensity as we join in the events that lead to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

During Lent, the church traditionally plays down celebration. Colours are muted. The seasonal colour purple, is the colour of preparation, repentance, and mourning. There are no flowers in church. We don't use the Glorias or Allelulias. We hopefully use this time to pray more. We take time to reflect on and order our relationships with God, with each other, and with our world. We take stock of our faith and take a long hard look at our Christian beliefs and practices.

We might choose to give something up for Lent. We might choose to go without favourite treats, or we might take up something that builds our faith, through spiritual discipline. I know a friend of mine gives up sweets every single year for Lent. Other people may choose to give up alcohol or smoking (Laura). I had an interesting chat with a woman on Friday who said she gives up chocolate and she views it as a challenge, a challenge that she chooses to accept. She asked me if I give anything up, and I had to admit, no, but I choose to try and pray more. In fact, this Lent, as a member of the Sodality of Mary, Mother of Priests, I've committed to praying the Rosary every day during Lent. I feel that will benefit my spiritual journey through Lent.

Here at Liverpool Parish Church, there are plenty of opportunities to experience Lent and our varied Lent Programme is a good place to start. The Lent Quiet morning that I will be leading will give us a chance to pause part way through Lent and to consider our journey with Jesus. It will be a chance to reflect and to think about how the rest of Lent will be observed leading up to the Passion of Jesus.

In this season of Lent, Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness. As we heard in our Gospel reading, immediately after his baptism by John, the Holy Spirit drives him into a hostile and difficult environment, where he is tested and tempted, although Mark doesn't provide us with many details. Jesus is being prepared for what is to come as he enters into his calling. It is significant that the number is forty days. Noah spent forty days on the Ark in the flood. Moses and the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness after their liberation from Egypt.

Elijah, broken and dejected, escaped into the wilderness for forty days. Forty days is symbolically a time of testing and preparation, a time to trust in God's faithfulness and provision. Time spent in the wilderness leads to renewed trust and faith and a fresh understanding of God's graciousness and love towards his people. In the story of Noah, the rainbow symbolises God's promise to save the people. The rainbow has also been adopted as a symbol for the LGBTQI+ community and the colours reflect the diversity of the community in addition to the spectrum of human sexuality and gender. I also believe it represents love, especially God's love for all people.

Today after our Eucharist service we will be starting our wedding preparations with the couples who are getting married this year at Liverpool Parish church by myself and my clergy colleagues. I can't wait for the day, as well as conducting weddings for mixed couples, I am able to conduct weddings for same sex couples. I hope this comes round sooner than forty years.

At the end of the forty years in the wilderness, the people of Israel enter into God's inheritance, the Promised Land. After forty days, Jesus, as he leaves the desert, proclaims the good news saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news". Most people experience some sort of wilderness or desert time in their lives. Being a Christian and being faithful to Jesus, does not protect us from difficult times and places. Baptism is not a shield against adversity, although it does provide strength and preparation for the journey. Why does Jesus need to be baptised at all? Jesus' embrace of John's baptism signifies a public act of commitment to the way of God that John has been preparing. With his baptism, Jesus signals the end of his former life. When he emerges from the waters of the river Jordan, Jesus is the first member of God's kingdom, completely free of obligation to anyone or anything but God. Jesus is now free to pursue God's call and empowered to do all the things that will define his ministry. Straight after his baptism, Jesus enters the wilderness.

What is the wilderness for you? Is it a place of grief, loneliness or isolation? Is it a place of addiction? A place of competition, wanting to be the biggest or the best, the overriding need above all else for status and kudos? Is it the slippery slope of negativity and cynicism that means you are always complaining? Is it a place of getting older or facing illness? It may be unemployment or the threat of redundancy and the potential consequence of homelessness. Whatever is the wilderness for each of us, it can be a place where we feel at risk, frightened and vulnerable. What is your wilderness?

In his wilderness, Jesus faced many temptations at the hand of Satan, and he emerged stronger, focused, and holy. Though we might not be able to avoid wilderness experiences in our lives, we can prepare for them, we can survive them, and we can emerge stronger and

holier from them. We can recognise that the good news of the Gospel can be experienced and lived out in the wilderness also. Preparation for the wilderness comes by walking closely with Jesus, being in daily communication with him. Our baptism was the beginning of that journey, but we need to remain on the road walking closely with Jesus. It is also good to note that the wilderness has angels. We need to be alert to these, alert to the positives and the gifts that can be experienced in desolation. God could use us as angels, as God's messengers, from time to time. If we can take time to give out a loving word or action, that could make a huge difference to someone in their wilderness, giving them the opportunity to perceive hope and be strengthened. If we could take time out to think about our environment and how we could make simple lifestyle choices, such as walking more, recycling, eating less or no meat, shop sustainably, reduce food waste and use our very own Liverpool Parish church reusable mugs for tea and coffee after our services. These are just a few ideas.

Wilderness isn't just the domain of Lent. We may find ourselves in it at any time, without warning. This period of Lent reminds us of that fact and encourages us to walk closely with Jesus, to prepare ourselves for the wilderness times. Let us remember this Lent that Jesus is in the wilderness. He goes before us, is alongside us, behind us and with us all the way. Whatever happens, whatever wilderness we go through, God in Jesus will be there. So, whether you are giving up chocolate, cigarettes or alcohol, becoming more consciously eco-friendly or taking up more prayers, and endeavouring to walk more closely with Jesus, use this Lent as a time of preparation. Use it as a time of reflection and a time to make positive changes.

Mthr Jennifer Brady