

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL – LENT 1 2019 SERMON CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST

Today, the Church presents its solemn face. It is in serious mood. Gone are the flowers which add to the beauty of this ancient place, gone the Gloria in excelsis, that burst of joy and praise at the beginning of the Eucharist, no more singing alleluia for the next 40 days. In Lent we turn our attention towards our Lord's saving death and resurrection. It is, then, perhaps a surprise, that on this, the first Sunday of Lent, our first two Scripture readings strike a somewhat different note.

The writer of Deuteronomy gave instructions for what we might describe as a Harvest Thanksgiving service, in which the first fruits of the harvest are to be brought to the priest, like the children in many churches and schools do each autumn, year by year, thanking God for food and shelter. However in Israel this was a harvest offering with a difference, a difference made in the instruction to recite what we might be seen as a statement of Israel's faith – its creed. It traced their history from the days of the wandering Aramean, the patriarch Jacob, through good times and then their slavery in Egypt, of how God had heard their cry and brought them, with great signs and wonders, not least the parting of the Red Sea, brought them to the plenty of the Promised Land. The Israelites were not simply celebrating the harvest, but more importantly their redemption from slavery to freedom.

Good fortune demands a willing sacrificial response. In the

freeing of the Israelites from slavery we see a foretaste of our redemption from sin in Jesus Christ. In the reading from the Letter to the Romans St Paul reminds us that it is the resurrection of Jesus which assures true redemption. In that faith Paul proclaimed lies salvation. Again we have an early credal statement of the Christian faith – 'Jesus is Lord' with the important rider that this redemption offers salvation not only to the one chosen race but to all humanity. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is generous to all who call on Him.

Both passages are powerful affirmations of faith in a loving God who has acted to save His people. The creed which we shall say in a few moments is the Church's summary of that divine love in creation, that saving act in Jesus death and resurrection and in God's continuing love in the work of the Holy Spirit.

His faith in God having been clearly affirmed in his baptism in the River Jordan, with the words 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased', Jesus must have realised that his own vocation was to be God's Messiah, the one sent to deliver humanity. But as so often, in life, an exhilarating, inspirational experience is followed by a period of testing. We can get up on a bright, sunny morning, full of the joys of spring and good intentions but one phone call, email or unfortunate encounter can change our day.

Even more trying is the experience that just when things seem to going well, some thought arises in the mind and a choice needs to be made as to what we should do, between

for example, our pleasure over our duty. For Jesus, the euphoria of his baptism is followed by that intense period of prayer which brought tempting thoughts. Evil is personified. The devil tempted Jesus as to how He would be the Messiah – by giving bread, using power in the way of earthly monarchs or by a clever stunt to draw people to Himself. In all three temptations Jesus was attacked at points of strengths in his life – his compassion, his commitment and his trust in the living God.

If we mean to use this Lent to follow Our Lord in resisting evil we must begin by recognising temptation. 'The late Bishop John Moorman one time Principal of Chichester Theological College & Residentiary Canon of this cathedral put it like this 'the inducement to fall short of the standards of life demanded by God is an experience from which no one who tries to live a Christian life can ever be free. No matter how high our ideals, however good our intentions, however consecrated our lives may be, sloth, fear and lust will conspire to bring us down and lead us into sin'. Of course, these days, there is much confusion as to what is a sin. I heard recently of a pupil in a church high school who was asked as part of an assembly to find a pebble and then to identify one of his sins, which the pebble might represent when placed on the altar on Ash Wednesday. Finding the pebble was easy but neither he nor his parents could for the life in them think of a sin. For them envy, unkind words, impatience were not seen as sinful. The penny dropped for me when I realised that without a sense of God, of being answerable for our lives, sin becomes mere wrong doing which is perhaps why in this country we find ourselves in a

moral vacuum, where physical concerns for the welfare of the body often become people's ultimate concern. So long as it does not hurt anyone else, look after number one becomes the moral norm.

Jesus wrestled with the power of evil. It was a struggle, even for the Son of God. As we heard he resisted being led astray by recalling the scriptures of his people. He had the firm foundation of the faith of his people. In that struggle with the power of evil, Jesus withstood temptation with a reference to the O.T. which he had learned from boyhood – 'man shall not live by bread alone', 'worship the Lord your God', 'do not put the Lord your God to the test'. It is a sad fact that in the UK growing generations have lacked that grounding in Scripture and the faith of the Church. We can no longer, beyond the church schools, rely on the rudiments the Bible and Christian faith being shared in the schools, quite the reverse in some. This puts a tremendous responsibility on Christian parents. It makes, for example, the work of the Cathedral's Pebbles group and similar groups in parish churches of vital importance in the nurture of the young.

Following our Lord's example it is our vocation to learn how to distinguish the selfless way of Christ from the whispering voices that would deflect us. During Lent we should deliberately set aside time to renew our knowledge of our faith in Christ Jesus – reading the Bible, sharing in a study group, reading one of the many books for Lent on sale in St. Olav's so that in these challenging times we have the confidence to speak for the faith we hold, to identify sin

and why it matters in the great scheme of things.

As we acknowledge and confess our sins in appropriate way, we must not become so personal that we forget the broader picture. Israel made a communal offering, Christ died for all. As part of global society, we should use Lent to discover in what ways we might play our part in eradicating the growing destruction of the planet by reducing our carbon footprint, helping to tackle the evil of poverty which leads to hunger and homelessness, the evil of abuse by social media and the failure to respect the integrity of those with whom in political or church life we disagree. The task may seem enormous but empowered by the Holy Spirit, the faith and witness of the first Christians changed the world.

Lent is a solemn time, a time for reflecting on our lives in the context of Our Lord's experience in the wilderness but more importantly reflecting on the knowledge that salvation was achieved by Christ's death and mighty resurrection which is at the heart of this and the offering of every Eucharist.

Sermon by Bishop Alan Chesters