

Lent 1 2020

As the Coronavirus spreads across the globe, and now to every continent except Antarctica, we are right to be concerned. But, as with all disasters of international significance around the world, whether it be a Tsunami, a global financial crisis or a pandemic, there are usually at least three fundamental human reactions.

One is – quite naturally – fear. Understandably, there is a great deal of fear around at the moment. The second is (hopefully) the realisation that we are a global community and that what happens to our fellow human beings on the other side of the world, can affect us all. This can engender genuine good.... positive gestures of aid and support.

But there can be a third, negative reaction: *blame*... and the tendency to demonise, borne out a fear of the unknown, which enables prejudice to flourish.

And so, we have had recent reports of the Chinese community being abused and even children being spiteful towards class mates whose family are originally from that part of the world. A reaction driven by *fear*.

The Gospel invites us to see such things from another perspective. It invites us to acknowledge our fears and open our hearts to God. Why? Because we believe in death and resurrection, which means that we believe that good can come from even the darkest situations in life.

Fear of the unknown has contributed to all sorts of prejudice and violence since ancient times. Jonathan Sacks, the former chief Rabbi, has written of it being fuelled by stories of sibling rivalry in the Old Testament: Jacob, hated by his jealous brothers... the rivalry between Cain and Abel being played out generation after generation, leading – many times in history – to Christianity, Islam and Judaism each seeing each other as threatening: competing brothers!

But again, the Gospel turns this around. *St Matthew's* Gospel, from which we have just heard, is, in many ways an invitation *not* to be fearful and afraid of difference, and of change. At the beginning of his Gospel, we have the appearance of the angel to Joseph in a dream, who says ***“Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...”***. And at the end, we have Jesus saying to the women at the tomb ***“Do not be afraid....”***

The account of Our Lord's temptation in the wilderness, which was our Gospel reading this morning, is all part of Matthew's attempt to alleviate his readers fear of the enormous changes *they* are going through, since the resurrection of Christ.

This scene has its roots in Israel's sacred past and is constructed in such a way to show that in following Christ, they are *not* completely abandoning their Jewish faith, but being faithful to it, because Jesus is indeed the Messiah they had been waiting for: the Christ, sent by God to restore and renew Israel.

They have nothing to fear, because Jesus is the “Son of God”, and by not caving in, not giving in to temptation and remaining utterly faithful to the Father he proves that he is just that. Indeed, this is the real focus of this scene for Matthew, not so much the temptations themselves.

Matthew sees all Israel’s history and its scriptures as finding their ultimate meaning in Jesus. This is why he often uses the phrase “*to fulfil the scriptures*” and why he uses the Old Testament so much in his Gospel, and – of course – why he has Jesus tempted in the wilderness, as were the ancient people of God. But they *did* cave in: they were tempted to rebel in the wilderness and build a golden calf to worship, instead of God. Jesus, the new Moses, doesn’t cave in, which proves he is indeed the Son of God, the Messiah.

But what has all this to say to us during this season of Lent? What has it got to say about how we might grow during these forty days?

Well, first of all, Matthew’s Gospel teaches us that faith may not liberate us from fear, but it will release from being imprisoned by it.

Whoever we are, and wherever we are, I believe that we should try and work at this: not being imprisoned by fear. When we are imprisoned by fear, our hearts harden, and prejudice and intolerance raise their heads. Fear can become unmanageable and lead to all sorts of problems, if we are not working at it. And the Church offers us tools with which to do it: study, groups, recommended reading, the liturgy, and the sacrament of confession – a truly wonderful cleansing and healing experience.

Of course, all these opportunities are enfolded in a certain austerity, during Lent. But there are two things I want to say here. Which may help us to keep that in perspective.

First: we can get very hung up on the word “sin” in Lent and – in many ways that is not always a bad thing. “*Turn away from sin..*” were some of the words addressed to us as ash was placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday .

St Paul, part of whose Letter to the Romans we heard in our second reading, speaks of *one man’s* (i.e. Adam’s) disobedience unleashing sin into the world, and our first reading from Genesis, although not history, tries to explain how this came about through a story which is really about what it means to be human.

But central to Paul’s theology is that before Christ everyone was a sinner, and however uprightly people tried to live, they never fulfilled the destiny God had in store for them. Now, the resurrection of Christ has overturned this, and we are reconciled to God through our life in Christ.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians “*For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*” (1 Cor. 15.1-22). In his oratorio “Messiah”, Handel sets those words extremely effectively, with the sopranos and tenors singing “For as in Adam all....*“die-ie...ie...”*: the C sharp on the second syllable giving the feeling of a body decomposing. And then we have “*Even so in Christ...shall all be made alive...*” All energy, pulse and life

The word for **“to sin”** which Pauls uses over and over again, doesn't simple mean “doing bad things”. The Greek word is **“har..man...tan..ein”** which means *separation from God* : i.e. losing a trusted intimacy with God which leads to unhappiness and strife.

WE need to confess the bad things we have done, but if we go down the road of indulgently wallowing in them we show a nervousness about God instead of joy in our discipleship. In our minds we see the phrase **“the fear of God”** as meaning nervousness and caution about God, when in fact it means having *reverence, respect and awe*....which is very different from being frightened of God. That's the last things he wants.

Consequently, the more we attempt to deepen that intimacy of our friendship with God, not least in Lent, the more we will find that whilst we might not be liberated from fear, at least we may not be imprisoned by it.

And please: let us not see that intimacy with God (our spiritual life) as a private compartment in our lives that we bring out from time to time. It is something on which we draw to inform every aspect of life, both within our whole being and all that is swirling around us in the world today.