

Lent 2 2020 Mattins

There is an anxiety often voiced by those who attend retreats organised by the Cathedral: what do we do during a weekend of silence and solitude when normal patterns of living are disrupted? To answer that we might begin by asking what Jesus did over 40 days of silence and solitude in the wilderness. How did he fill his time for those 6 weeks that we recall in this season of Lent? The gospels suggest that he spent at least some of the time reflecting on the word of God in the scriptures. The result was when he was tempted and tested, he averted the demonic – to use a J.K. Rowling image – by mobilising the words of scripture. Our second reading this morning used the image of a sharp sword to describe the same power of scripture to cut through what is not of God. (Hebrews 4 v.12)

But the mystical tradition of St. John suggests that we find the power of the word of God in another source, too. The Gospel of John teaches that all things, all creation, came into being through the Word of God. Therefore, the creation itself is a text message from God in which we are to discern and hear his word to us. In 1950 the painter Stanley Spencer began a series of paintings depicting imaginatively what Jesus did on each of his 40 days in the wilderness. Spencer never finished

the project but one of the paintings he did complete is entitled: “Consider the lilies of the field”. It portrays Jesus in the desert, just after the rains have come, smelling the flowers and gazing with love at the beauty that has burst into blossom. Jesus is pictured finding strength and nourishment not only in the word of scripture but also through the word of creation.

And reflecting on the word in creation forms part of *our* Lenten observance too. One of the things I love about Mattins during Lent is that the Benedicite, the Song of Creation, is sung. Malcom Archer’s very attractive setting, which we heard earlier, is so concise you may have missed the fact that the Benedicite follows the pattern of creation set out in the first chapter of Genesis. First the physical elements of creation – the sun and moon, fire and heat, frost and cold are summoned to praise their creator. Then the creatures – all that moves in the waters and the fowls of the air are summoned; and finally, the people of God, living and departed are called to bless the Lord and magnify him for ever. And one of the effects of hearing this recital of all creation is that our humanity is put into perspective. We are only one small voice in a vast and wonderful chorus of praise from the whole of creation. What’s more we come last in the summons to offer praise to God. And this should instil in us humility – a recognition that we are just a tiny part of God’s

handiwork; called not to dominate the natural world for our own ends, but to read it as a word from God as Jesus did and to work with it to glorify the creator.

But it is also appropriate to use the Benedicite in Lent because indirectly it draws us to the efficacy of the cross of Jesus. Towards the end of the canticle three named characters are summoned: “O Ananias, Azarias and Misael bless ye the Lord”. So, who were these people? The text of the Benedicite comes originally from the Greek version of the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. It is called “The Song of the Three” and appears in the account of three young Jewish men, Ananias, Azarias and Misael, who are also known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These three were living in exile in Babylon and working as civil servants for King Nebuchadnezzar. All was going well until the King issued a decree ordering everyone, including Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to worship a golden statue set up by the King. The three, all devout Jews, refused to worship an idol and so the King ordered them to be thrown into the burning fiery furnace.

But having thrown them into the fiery furnace the King was amazed to see, not three, but *four* men walking in the fire quite unharmed by the deadly flames; and the fourth man had

the appearance of a god. The early church identified this fourth man as Jesus. They saw this story as a preview of what happened after the death of Jesus when he went down to hell and rescued all those imprisoned there. And having been rescued from death by fire the young Jewish men sang “The Song of the Three” which we know as the Benedicite summoning all creation, including fire and heat, to praise their God who was present with them in trouble and saved them.

The story of the burning fiery furnace is a story about trusting in God, calling us not to be afraid even in the face of events over which we have no control. Indeed, one of the most common phrases to be found in scripture is: “Do not be afraid”. That is God’s constant word to us. Someone has actually done the maths and found that the phrase “Do not be afraid” comes 366 times across the whole Bible – one for each day of the year including a leap year like 2020. It’s a word of God in scripture we should use to avert anxiety as the levels of fear about the coronavirus and climate change ramp up. But more than that we should take note that we can also mitigate against fear by looking at the wonder of creation and considering the providential care of God. I mentioned earlier Stanley Spencer’s painting of Jesus in the wilderness considering the lilies – and the command of Jesus to consider the lilies of the field was

prefaced in the gospels by the command “Do not worry about your life.” Rather fix your eyes on the words of scripture that can counter the fear that undermines; fix your eyes on the word of God in creation and praise him as the Benedicite teaches us to do through Lent. There is no better antidote to fear because the act of praising God takes us out of ourselves and magnifies him. It fixes our attention on Jesus who, as the three young men discovered, is a very present help in trouble.