

## LENT 3

I found both our Bishops' discussing our Gospel reading today on Facebook, something they regularly do! Off the record, I can't help feeling that sometimes it appears they are competing with one another - and who's the smartest or funniest, on camera! There's a great long section between them on why John doesn't place today's well-known story at the beginning of Holy Week as the other three Gospels do, and then another one on why this particular reading is chosen for Lent at all. That's a hard one to unravel or know.

Perhaps one interpretation is that this season of Lent is all about asking ourselves how we are drawn to the Christ who follows the way of the Cross willingly and voluntarily. Is not this the same Christ who ultimately conquers death, and will rise again on the third day? John is building up a picture, much as a playwright does, to suggest that we can easily get so distracted with all the markets outside the temple and what they are selling to us, but have we even begun to understand that Christ is not talking about buildings or their special place in history or indeed about the rituals and sacrifices offered inside them. No, he is talking about his own body and inviting us to ask ourselves in this season what it really means to be the body of Christ here on earth – how connected are we, with Him who suffered on the cross and who bore the pains and insults of an occupying force intent on destroying him.

I think St Paul is saying something similar to the community of Corinth he is writing for. His argument is summed up quite starkly: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

I would suggest we all need signs and wisdom to help us understand afresh why this period of Lent matters and indeed explore together the different kind of ways in which we can live closer to God, through study, prayer, and yes, more regular worship time and space, to be still before God.

As you know, I have produced a Lenten programme for our Benefice but I cannot force you to take part! I can only offer a few well-tryed ways of deepening our faith together and a few well-tryed ways of building up the body of Christ.

I do think that the emphasis on giving things up in Lent is actually a distraction from the main focus, which I believe, is to be faithful in following Christ - and to ask of God that which we prayed for in the first line of today’s collect: “Give us insight to discern your will for us.” We are not asking God to be clever but we may well be asking His guidance to be wise, and His Counsel to care a little more about our own souls, and how best to nurture the treasures of our heart.

Yesterday, I found myself in a Salvation Army hall in Stowmarket, at a Diocesan invitation to hear a speaker who specialises in spiritual direction or ‘accompaniment’ as it is

often called. This is not just the professional domain of particular clergy but also the gift of many talented lay people who offer regular periods of time throughout the year for someone like you or me to meet up with another Christian to be encouraged (rather than counselled), and to open up about where we are on our spiritual pathway. It is primarily a ministry of listening and sharing ways in which we can re-connect with God and his will for us, 'opening our souls' if you will in as honest and receptive way as we can. I suppose you could call it a spiritual 'mot' but without the worry of the bill for new tyres at the end! To seek guidance does not mean you have to be in trouble or any kind of crisis for that matter. No, it is about building a relationship of trust with someone who is there for you as faith-friend, a fellow pilgrim, and everything is said in confidence without any worry of embarrassment.

And we were reminded yesterday that humility and laughter play an important part in that shared conversation. To seek spiritual direction is not at all like consulting one of those self-help guides how to be more successful, or, 'How can I be more spiritual than that person in the pew in front of me'? Instead it is about being completely honest with one another and judgement-free because God cares about our passions as well as our worries, about what is possible or even imaginative rather than their opposite. Imagine meeting face to face with a St Paul or St John. Once over the shock of being in the presence of holiness or just being in the company of a celebrity, you very soon know that you are in safe hands, with wise guides who will pray with you as well as for you, when you go home.

These are just a few thoughts from today's readings which will go on to our church website, as usual, but hopefully not reach the Bishop's office. Mea culpa! But I do wish you a happy, fulfilling and, if at all possible, *accompanied Lent*, with a soulmate!

Amen.