

## **NEXT BEFORE LENT '24**

I got a generous offer on Friday, from Vodaphone:

“Grab free pancake toppings, on us, up to the value of £2 from your local Sainsbury’s this #Feel Good Friday”!

Well, it must be that time of year again. Pancakes on Shrove Tuesday and my penance, another PCC meeting in the evening, instead of a romantic meal for two! Most people will not know what you know, that penance is actually about reconciliation, those sacramental moments when we seriously say sorry. That’s what the verb ‘to shrive’ means – to present oneself for confession, penance, and absolution.

But sadly, it has a bad press; often associated with gloomy or scary confessional boxes where you are hemmed in and where it is dark, a place where you hear whispering like you used to in public libraries. Those of you who go to a spiritual director, will know that is a depressing caricature and far from what actually ‘happens’. Whether it is in a private home, a chapel, or on a park bench – there are times of the liturgical year when it is valuable to say sorry, to unburden honestly, to seek spiritual counsel, and to pray for creative and helpful ways to draw closer to God, and listen to His voice more attentively. Confession isn’t supposed to be a heavy burden but instead the opposite – a release, a letting go, a liberation so that we can start out again. It is a time to renew our friendships that have gone wrong, and make better decisions about our daily lives and how we care for those around us or, how we reach out to those we shall never know.

You don't have to physically go out to Kagera in Tanzania to see how we can learn and help each other or, to the West Bank, to witness the fear of living under Occupation.

We are, though, in danger of being saturated by all the woes of the world and understandably perhaps, our intercession so often becomes a long list of woes when perhaps shorter prayers will suffice. In our Epistle today, for example, we hear the telling phrase 'Let light shine out of darkness' which, if followed by a period of silence...allows us time to make our own prayer, think our own thoughts, and gently allow God in to guide and lead us, as if by whispering to us.

Our Gospel of the Transfiguration is, I believe, a helpful approach to how we can 'do Lent' this year. Jesus is taking his closest disciples on a memorable mountain trip which, when the drama of seeing past that celebrity moment is over (seeing Elijah and Moses there) or seeing Jesus in dazzling white...is a moment of quiet reflection. God speaks to them directly, willing them to draw nearer to his Son, the beloved. From the cloud it is like a rainbow appearing, a revelatory moment to both encourage and inspire the followers of Jesus; we too, need his closer company just as we also need to be challenged by him to become torchbearers for greater justice and compassion in the world.

And, of course, Lent is a great time to learn new ways of thinking and living the Christian story. Our Archbishop's choice of Lenten Book for our house groups is sub-titled 'Wisdom from Black Spirituality for People of Faith'. I am,

thrilled on two fronts. First, that by opening up our homes for smaller groups, we will be committing to 5 weeks of shared time together that will not be like going back to school so much as the exciting invitation to go climbing together with Our Lord. Second, that as willing participants, even for this short time, we will be changed by the experience and look more expectantly for the promises and hope of Easter.

Here's a little taster to tempt you, from the author Selina Stone's own words, on the subject of practising contemplation, making space for God, she would say:

“Contemplation can feel something like inviting a person back to your home for dinner... (p.117)...

What might God say as God makes God's home in our lives?”

Today's Gospel story is testimony to all of that – letting God speak in and through us and taking the risk to both transfigure and transform our lives in familiar ways and new ways. May our Lent-time together, starting on #Feel Good Wednesday, be a sign of God spending quality time with us, and for us, wherever we meet?

Amen.