

1st SUNDAY IN LENT 2024

(Genesis 9.8-17)

1 Peter 3.18-end

Mark 1.9-15

The qualities of penitence and humility are not very fashionable today, although they belong to the oldest traditions of not only the Christian and Jewish faiths, but of many others as well, including what we might call the Wisdom tradition of the ancient world. In the Old Testament we read of sackcloth and ashes being put on by people who have done something they regret and are now mortified at their error of word or deed.

Penitence does entail a huge effort of acknowledgement or recognition of what we have done and then screwing up the courage to say sorry. It is a profoundly humbling experience. Penitence and humility go together.

The Lenten Collect is one of my favourites, because after acknowledging our sins we then ask God to: “Create in us new and contrite hearts...”

This word “contrite” is still used today to refer to people who have done something wrong and know it and want to apologise and make good. The word derives from the Latin “con” meaning “wholly” or “completely” and “terere” meaning “to bruise”, of which the past participle is “tritum”. So contrite means “wholly bruised” which has developed into “brokenhearted or deeply sorrowful for sin”, “penitent”, or “remorseful”. These words, heavy with meaning as they are, convey the seriousness of our sinful actions, which have the effect of separating us from God in whose image both we and our neighbour are made.

So it is good that in the Church’s wisdom we are given the Lenten period of five weeks to think about our behaviour and priorities, our speech and thoughts. It is a highly personal business. But we pray in that collect prayer to be given not just a contrite heart, but also a new one. In other words we are appealing to God, through the agency of Jesus Christ, to forgive what is in our hearts and on our consciences, that “we may

receive from him, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness”, and so to allow us to make a new start.

As we all know we are far from perfect. It is precisely because each one of us has a reason to ask for forgiveness that Jesus urges us to be very careful about judging others. In John 8, which is one of two Gospel readings appointed for Ash Wednesday, the Pharisees who come to Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, in order to test him, represent the authorities of the Jewish Law. What is fascinating in that reading is that Jesus is silent for so long, before making his statement about a sinless person being the one entitled to cast the first stone. Jesus himself would therefore be entitled to do that, as he is without sin, but he does not condemn the woman. The Pharisees melt away, all suddenly aware of the truth of what he has said. So it is for us, who are quick to judge others but are blissfully unaware of the mote in our own eye. All God needs from us is the insight and humility to recognise that and act accordingly.

It was the German theologian Meister Eckhardt, who coined the phrase “God sees us with the same eye with which we see him”. This is about insight and humility, but also about learning to be a disciple, a follower of The Way which Jesus taught us, and which God always wanted us to follow and emulate. Jesus demonstrates how difficult that way is in the account of his own temptation by the devil.

As we know we are all called to be disciples; but it is our choice whether we answer the call. The first disciples recognised that the Kingdom of God was drawing near in the ministry of Jesus. They were called to a life of repentance and faith. They were called to be with Jesus together and to be sent out, just as we are called and sent out through the Holy Spirit today (Matthew 28: go and make disciples of all nations).

To be called to be a disciple of Jesus is to be called to a life of learning, growing and formation (maybe, dare I say it, even transformation) into the likeness of Christ. Jesus draws us his disciples apart and teaches us the

ethics and actions of the Kingdom of Heaven, the pattern of prayer and worship, and the principle of living together in community.

Being a disciple also carries a cost, as the life and death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer bear witness: in opposition to the Nazis who wanted to eliminate independent organisations, especially churches, he and others set up the Confessing Church. As a result Bonhoeffer became more and more restricted in his activities and teaching, was imprisoned for 18 months, then executed just one month before the end of World War 2. His most well-known work is *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he compares cheap grace with costly grace; cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; costly grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his or her life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. The first disciples left everything they had to follow Jesus, who experienced great pain and suffering. By denying ourselves, leading selfless rather than selfish lives, and taking up the cross which we all have to bear at some stage in our lives, we also can join in the hope and joy which Jesus has in store for us – in the words of John 10, we can have life in all its abundance, even beyond our earthly death.

Being a disciple implies learning, continual learning by the renewing of our minds, and by being tested: as Paul explains, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” The process starts with baptism, when we are washed and made holy, set apart for God. God has marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit who is at work within us constantly reminding us of his love and compassion, so that we can respond by offering our whole lives in service. We cannot be part-time disciples. We are being formed by the Holy Spirit into a new community – the people of God.

This Lent St Mary's is once more offering a variety of ways of continuing our learning: one way is to read the current Lent book, "Tarrying Awhile" by Selina Stone, which is the subject of our Lent Groups on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at different times; or, to attend a Lent lunch, this year in St Mary's House in aid of our link diocese Kagera in Tanzania on three Fridays in Lent; or to follow the Stations of the Cross on three Fridays at 6pm; finally please do take part in the Bishops' Lent Appeal, also in aid of Kagera; all of these advertised in the E-news, so do have a look and take advantage of the opportunities being provided.

So as we make our way through the season of penitence and self-examination I wish us all a fruitful and prayerful Lent, and a greater sense of discipleship, of knowing God in Jesus Christ to be at the centre of our lives.

PBW

16.2.2024