

LENT 1... (Year A) '26

Even if you don't read my chosen Lent book for 2026, you will soon know why I chose it! The first line from the cycling nun, Liz Dodd, opens her Introduction with the words, "I used to hate Lent... because I found it performative, a season spent contorting ourselves into sadness... War, genocide, poverty and homelessness will not come to an end because we give up sweets for a month and a half." This Lent she challenges Christians to do more than give up chocolate: Lent is God's invitation to shake up your life, rattle your parish and change the world. So I couldn't put the book down, after so many years of being underwhelmed by so many other Lent offerings, since largely forgotten. It fired me up to create the Lent talks, topics and speakers that I have, this year, to complement her call to use this season more creatively and, to discover more proactive, radical ways, in living out the Gospel, day by day.

Four of the chapters exactly reflect our Sunday Gospels apart from the second chapter, the story of the Transfiguration in the Roman lectionary while in the Anglican one, we hear about Nicodemus. That's a small detail really. This ex-journalist is now a Sister of St Joseph of Peace living out and testing her practical theology in practical ways by living in a community which welcomes refugees and cares for them. On a weekend in which we remember the 4th anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, that is a great charism – to promote peace and justice – to go out of our churches or convents and take Christ's challenge to his disciples, to resist oppression or

inequality and walk alongside those who are suffering and hurting. I have even sent a poster of our Lenten talks to our local MP! When I last saw her at our service of 9 Lessons and Carols, I was quite shocked that she had to be accompanied by a 'bodyguard' effectively. She told me that was now a rule for all MPs invited to all public occasions, even religious ones.

In other words, the need to interpret and act upon the Gospel isn't for someone else to do, far away. It is actually on our own doorstep, our own neighbourhood, our own workplace. And it is something to inspire and change us, despite all the uncertainties and risks so often involved. A simple cartoon in this week's *Church Times* described it simply – with a picture of colourful people queuing up to enter their Church, and the huge outside noticeboard read: "Embrace Hope All Ye Who Enter Here." That's not 'Easter in Disguise' but 'Easter for all to see and enjoy'.

The same is true about the heart of the wilderness story today which we know so well, and our reflecting, learning, a Gospel of solidarity. Our author rightly describes this period of testing as 'the moment when God experienced the raw edge of humanity – hunger, shame, powerlessness and vulnerability. It is the moment when God could have backed off'. The tempter promised Jesus abundance, security and authority, if only he would cut himself off from humanity. Jesus chose solidarity instead. Yes, what an extraordinary revelation for the beginning of Lent: Jesus defeated Satan by aligning himself with the poor and powerless. That's why and where liberation theology comes alive, especially when our

news Headlines distract us away from actually confronting the destructive effects of denigrating human rights, and the destructive effects of the empire of money in the hands of the few and, yes, of historic cases of sexual abuse which are now coming to light. Jesus didn't go into the desert to get away from people or to have some kind of extended 'mystic moment' but instead, how to get closer to those without status, wealth and power. Jesus embraces and loves those on the margins and those side-lined by the dominant systems of power and control. 'They are the most human' says Liz Dodd: 'they are where we encounter God'.

So this is a different and challenging 'take' on a wilderness story that is not an escape into individualism, but an open and public encounter with the everyday things and people that matter. I think of yesterday's Fairtrade meeting in the Shire Hall thanking those who have made Woodbridge a 'Fairtrade town' and how we can do more to promote those world-wide affected by inequalities in trade, or labour, and by the dire effects of climate change. We can support as well as belong to a global family.

Nearer to home, we can influence and resist the Leadbeater Bill which insists not on end of life care but voluntary euthanasia instead. We can support our Hospice movement, especially our local St Elizabeth's. There are so many ways in which Lent really is a preparation and celebration of becoming Easter people once again - and led by Christ's example, the choices he made, we really can travel hopefully and change the world.

