

Sunday next before Lent

It is a long time since I climbed a mountain in my scouting days. It is when I first discovered Kendal mint cake and all the other goodies you needed in your rucksack to keep you fed, safe, and warm. I recall the preparation and planning was more time-consuming than the climbing itself; and of course the view from the top is always exhilarating whatever the weather conditions; the sheer scale of the panoramic mountain view meant any people looked like pins in the landscape, barely recognisable. And if memory serves me right, the descent was much quicker, and sometimes we would skip and run across stone and crag and stream, sometimes throwing caution to the wind!

God likes mountains too. They are places of encounter whether speaking through cloud or burning sunshine. Moses, we are told spent 40 days and 40 nights up on the mountain – which is way beyond obtaining the Duke of Edinburgh award, or Queen Scout's award, as they were affectionately known. In a way I jest because these mountain top experiences are less to do with athleticism or human endurance, and more to do with seeing what God has in store for us and, whether we are attentive to His voice.

'Be still and know that I am God'.... 'Do not be afraid'.... These are the recurring words and narrative of God meeting with us, speaking to us, and reassuring us. All we are asked to do is to have a vision and go with it, a vision which doesn't expect us to get to see the mountain view without working hard and,

collaboratively. How to get there and, share the vision is our challenge. We must not look forward to Easter **without** Lent, as God doesn't believe in either a false start or, a quick-fix. If God likes mountains, God also likes our preparation, exploration, and journeying to reach them. It is good then to prepare for Ash Wednesday and our Lenten journey this year – not in that negative way ('I always give up chocolate, or alcohol') – but in a transformative way. Can we say instead, 'I want to listen to God more, and instead of asking or telling God to do all sorts of things, know his presence to be truly enriching, even without the need for words?

Most of last week I was distracted why Margate Council have twice removed the freezer which was a formative part of Banksy's latest mural, titled 'Valentine's Day Mascara'. Thanet District Council said "on the grounds of safety" in that bland, autocratic way that councils so often do! I mention it because we need the whole picture to tell what an uncomfortable narrative about domestic abuse is like, in this instance, and how a 1950s housewife responded. With Banksy, whoever he or she is, we viewers are being asked to hold the tensions of Lent and Easter together, as a whole: the tragedies and victories of life before death. It is that serious, I believe.

Bishop Martin touched on that last week too when he sat through hour upon hour of debate at General Synod on questions of LGBTI sexuality and, speech after speech about 'blessing' versus 'marriage'; no mention at all in that week of weeks, about what was happening in Turkey and Syria.

Perhaps we should ask the next Synod to be a mountain-top one, with every representative given their own walking boots, but perhaps that is not such a kind or realistic thought!

Remember, Lent is not a time to fear but a time to re-discover what God is saying to us, individually, as a Benefice, and as a national as well as a Church, catholic. For the second of those, we definitely need a new 'vision statement' – how to grow the kingdom in this patch of Suffolk and how to invest in a shared future, with Christ our cornerstone – leading us, guiding us, loving us into that future. 'Get up and do not be afraid' says Jesus. We are being encouraged and equipped to seek out those mountain views, to look for glory in one another and in the world, instead of being over-critical of one another. We must support each other as we travel. 'Be still and know...'

There is a new daily prayer for you on the home page of our church website. There is the Lenten challenge of helping our sisters and brothers in Kagera and, at home, to look at the issues of modern slavery, highlighted by Banksy's timely mural. There is the opportunity to pray more together, to rest awhile in our Epiphany Chapel, come to Communion mid-week, keep Holy Week and set that week apart!

"Eyes will see what hearts await" says our theologian-poet in 'Tumbling into Light'. That's a profound vision for us all to treasure, even if our climbing days are over, and our landscape, a little flatter and calmer.