

20th February 2021

Dear Friends,

Well here we are in Lent 2021, this time last year, whilst in Lent we were still going to worship in our buildings, news was beginning to build from China, and then from Italy and other places in Europe, that something serious was going on in the world, I think at that point that some of us were more aware of it than others. In less than three weeks the country would enter into lockdown for the first time, and new words and thoughts were added to our daily vocabulary, Covid-19, social distancing, self-isolation, shielding and so many more. We washed our hands more than ever, supermarket shelves were stripped and toilet rolls became worth their weight in gold. We had entered a strange new world. I am fairly sure that at that point none of us had ever dreamed that almost a year later we would find ourselves in the same position, the new words less strange perhaps, but our awareness heightened to the threat to life, and the welfare of all. In that time masks have become compulsory in shops and enclosed public spaces, and regulations governing our freedom change on a regular basis.

I wonder, as you look back over the last year, which some are describing as one long Lent, how you are feeling? Have you become resigned to this new way of being and are seeking to keep your head down until it is all over? Are you fed up and frustrated? Are you mourning for what was, or perhaps for a loved one? These have been difficult days, and none of us can deny that, to do so would be to lie to ourselves and to others. There have been highlights of course, we have seen appreciation for delivery drivers, bus drivers, posties, supermarket workers, and those who keep the day to day wheels of life turning, those who often go unseen or unappreciated have become our heroes, not to mention the work of carers and the NHS. Martin have looked after neighbours, communities have come together to support food banks, to deliver medicines and shopping and to help the vulnerable. Alongside that though the demand for assistance from foodbanks has risen, many have found themselves furloughed or worse unemployed, Highstreet chains have collapsed, and that is only in this country. Across the world whilst we celebrate the roll out of the vaccine other countries still have none, those working with refugees and obviously the refugees themselves struggle with daily living. Covid-19, whilst once called the great leveler is anything but that, the poverty gap is showing starkly, and the world must cry out for justice.

So here we are, at the start of a new Lenten period, how then are we going to enter it, have we, as the text of Mark's gospel suggests, been driven here? That is just one of the themes of this reading that I would like to draw out today, so maybe now is a good time to pause and ponder it:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1: 9-15)

Notice the words used, after the affirmation of the Spirit, those remarkable words "you are my Son, the Beloved" Jesus is driven into the desert, according to the text in Mark this is not a choice, it is simply a fact, the days that lay before him are not in his hands but in the hands of God. Is that how we feel at this time,

Covid-19 would certainly not be our choice, in a sense we have been driven into isolation and lockdown, I wonder where we find God here? Maybe we note the next part of the text, Jesus was with the wild beasts and angels waited on him, could it be that the wilderness was not such an inhospitable place after-all, but a place of coming apart, even of resting (though a forty day fast is extreme), and what does it mean to be with the wild beasts, or as Noel Moules puts it in his teaching with wild nature, a part of creation itself, creation we must remember that was spoken into being by the word, who is revealed to us as the Christ? Perhaps this angelic ministry and this oneness with creation is what sustained Jesus through those days and equipped him to set out into the short enfleshed ministry that fills our Gospel accounts over two thousand years later!

How do we respond now, we have been driven into our homes once again, where and how do we encounter God? If you were Jesus, I wonder how those words "You are my Son, the Beloved" sink into your heart and mind through those forty days? Are you able to receive them for yourself? For in the hardness and harshness of these days I wonder if repentance, that great theme of Lent is all about turning (for that is what repentance is) towards God's words of love for us, hear some of the words of Scripture:

- You are fearfully and wonderfully made- Psalm 139
- You are precious and honoured in my sight and I love you- Isaiah 43
- I call you friends- John 15

I am sure you can add many more, so can I but those who print this letter to take out to those without email may not thank me for it! So, yes, Jesus was driven into the desert, but he was also ministered to, so perhaps you can use some of this time to allow God to minister to you, to receive for yourself some of those words of affirmation, for you are loved, the world is loved, and perhaps we need to remember that in order to share love we need to receive love, we love because he loved us first- 1 John: 4. It is from that focused and grounded centre that we are sent out. Yes Jesus was driven into the desert, but the text reveals that he was ministered to by angels and the wildness of creation, may the wild Spirit minister to us in these days. I leave you with a poem for the desert:

<i>Show me myself,</i>	<i>by the lies of comfort,</i>
<i>reveal to me my deepest desires,</i>	<i>the demands that clamour...</i>
<i>strip away my defences,</i>	<i>show me that I am loved,</i>
<i>my pretences,</i>	<i>sought after,</i>
<i>my excuses,</i>	<i>treasured,</i>
<i>lead me within,</i>	<i>known....</i>
<i>through my own eternal,</i>	<i>and grant me the power to look</i>
<i>internal desert,</i>	<i>love in the face,</i>
<i>to connect with the</i>	<i>and see at last,</i>
<i>source of my truest life,</i>	<i>mirrored in my face,</i>
<i>no longer distracted</i>	<i>a glimpse of your glory</i>

You are loved, you are precious to God, you are beloved, fearfully and wonderfully made, and with you the whole of creation of which you are a part is filled with holy possibilities. As for the virus, this too shall pass, the question for us is how we will emerge. Will we like Jesus emerge from this time of testing in the power of the Spirit, in some senses the choice is ours, will we trust ourselves, in all of our griefs, doubts and frustrations to the one who holds the end from the beginning? The one whose desire is to make all things new.

I apologise for this being a long letter, I wish you many blessings for your Lenten journey, and as always I make the offer, if you would like to talk, don't hesitate to be in touch.

Peace and blessings



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