

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 21 February

Theme: Lent I

Isolation Radio Talk

The Abraham Factor

Good Morning on this first Sunday in the Church season of Lent.

A gift the Church brings to those who follow the Christian road is the rhythm of the seasons of the year as you follow the life of Christ; you can no more ignore Good Friday than Easter Day - it is surprising just how many do just that; no more can you ignore what Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent says, if you want to take the season seriously. 600 years before Jesus the Prophet Jeremiah (29.13), said "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart," or to put it another way, 'if with all your heart you truly seek me, you will surely find me'. True then; true now.

At Lent's beginning I confront you with the truth that, whatever you say, however you say it, the truth is that you have turned away from God, and from what God longs for you to be; that is simply part of our human condition. A second truth is; unless your words and deeds, prayers and speaking, effect transformation in you; transformation followed by action; your words and intentions are empty of meaning.

The Christian cannot speak about worship as essential to growing into God and then regard it as optional; a Christian must not be a stranger to worship. If it is known you say you are a Christian, you are watched, believe me; the when, as well as the way you worship, is noted. As the Lent pilgrimage begins none of us can pretend to love God and ignore that time of thoughtful sorrow for our failings.

A third truth is that Lent is a marker, a signpost if you like, that points to personal transformation and a willingness to do just that; transformation in you is the inevitable consequence of a life that comes into the light of God.

Transformation is at the very heart of our evolution from dust to glory; but what you know in your head often you will not accept in your hearts. Unless you are isolated from cold blowing winds you know your Christian faith and your Church and you are caught up in a crisis of identity and belief.

Lent most often opens by remembering Jesus alone in the desert; there he tried to work out the work he had to do and his destiny. His life shows how steadfastly he kept to those values he claimed for himself, alone, in the harsh desert land.

Come now to the Church of the present day. This Lent especially, we are on the threshold of change, maybe transformation. Accelerated by the events of the past year, you ask about the shape of the Church that is emerging from political and social developments in the world, in our nation, in society. You may want the Church to tell you what to believe; you become disappointed because you hear different voices. Some of the conflict is wanting to be told but not wanting to be heard. I only ask you to remember the rich man in Jesus' parable who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life; he did not like the answer; he went away, we are told, sorrowing.

Some yearn wistfully, in both Church and Nation, for a return to old values - to a stability we once thought existed. Perhaps that dominated the call for the return of Sovereignty in our relations with Europe; for the Church it emerges in the language of worship as if God is more pleased or less by a particular form of words.

I suggest God's questions and priorities are different. God asks if, by the lives of those who lay claim to the name of Christ, women and men, girls and boys are persuaded for Christ, against a fierce enemy who says to his friends, not in words of amazement, as they did when the Christian Church began after the first Easter Day, but now in a sneering tone - 'How these Christians love one another'.

God may have other and different questions. God might want to know if the Good News (that is a translation of the word Gospel) silently walks and talks with you day-by-day by day-by-day; does that love for God which you fumble to show through the ritual and tradition of the Church; does it find expression every day in ordinary things? Or, and here is the rub: does it appear only on special days, Sunday perhaps?

Do you, Christian, belong to a separate and peculiar people? Surely not! The Christian life is not a separate existence, nor the construction of a thing called a religious life; rather, it is the celebrating, the promotion, the strengthening of all that is good and whole and genuine in all ordinary human life.

It is a life shot through with what you might call The Abraham Factor: the willingness to step out, fearfully, into uncertainty; uncertainty infused with the conviction that the Holy Spirit is beckoning you on the next part of your journey.

Soon we shall hear that one of the charges brought against Jesus was precisely in the terms of his temptation; that he would destroy and rebuild the Temple. It seems possible Jesus sensed the Temple was doomed; indeed, the Romans did destroy it less than 30 years later; but what Jesus said are words of encouragement and hope. Even though one stone would not be left upon another, that would not be an end but a beginning. Do not doubt that Jesus loved the Temple; he wept over it; he risked arrest so that it could be what his Father had meant it should be - a house of prayer; not a den of thieves.

You may feel regret at a passing age; I have news for you: it has already passed. St Paul wrote of his times, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4.16). Yes, our outward humanity is in decay, yet day-by-day we *are* renewed. Paul speaks, although we would not really want to hear him today: about the forces of death and decay which constantly wear down the Christian Church and its ministry. They are certainly present now; but, says Paul, 'Don't ever loose heart'.

The difference for you, in being a Christian, as Lent begins, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, you journey towards God. The journey will take you down difficult roads; you are told that things must be shaken in our day if the kingdom which cannot be shaken is to be seen. Such a journey you have begun; journey's end will be a glorious Easter Day.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray to the one God, Creator, Word and Spirit,
that our lives may bear witness to our hope.

Truly dust we are, and to dust we shall return;
and truly yours we are, and to you we shall return.
Help this to be a time of turning round and beginning again.

Through the forty days of Lent, help us to follow you
and find you: in the discipline of praying
and in the drudgery of caring -
in what ever we deny ourselves,
and whatever we set ourselves to learn or do.

Help us to discover you
in our loneliness and in community,
in our emptiness and our fulfilment,
in our sadness and our laughter.

Help us to find you when we ourselves are lost.

Help us to follow you on the journey to Jerusalem
to the waving palms of the people's hope,
to their rejection, to the cross and empty tomb.

Help us to perceive new growth amid the ashes of the old.
Help us carrying your cross, to be signs of your Kingdom,
Of your Good News.
Amen.