

Sermon of Fr Iain Forbes, All Saints Church, Woodham.

First Sunday of Lent. 21 February 2020.

Mark 1: 9-15. Genesis 9:8-17.

The baptism of Christ. John being displaced. The descent of the dove. And immediately after the baptism, the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness, and Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him [...].

The bit of Jesus being driven into the wilderness. What does that make you think of?

“Forty days and forty nights,

Thou was fasting in the wild”

and that thing of fasting for forty days, it sounds hard, it sounds like really hard work, “Oh he must have had an awful time sitting there in the wilderness, eating nothing but bread and drinking water, how much he loved us because of all this he went...” I don’t think we understand.

There are times, not least in lockdown, when the idea of having over a month, communing with nature, in the wild places, sound incredibly attractive. Actually I’d like to do nothing more than go off to the Lake District and yomp around in the open air. I could do that. Would you like a bit of that? A bit of that getting away? And I think that’s what Jesus is doing. He’s getting back to basics. He’s not punishing himself. He’s not going through a kind of endurance test. Because Lent shouldn’t be an endurance test. It’s not a question of beating us up, “we beat ourselves up for forty days so that we deserve Easter” – no we don’t! We have forty days and forty nights of relative peace, in which we can rediscover the pattern of relationship deep down the heart of everything.

The one that was set there in the making of things. The one that is guaranteed by the promise of the rainbow. In the wilderness “with the wild beasts”, being in a right relationship with nature and with the animal world and with the things around it. Francis was right, he understood. And it’s not about “because they’re cute”. It’s because they’re alive, and their aliveness is the same aliveness that’s deep down the heart of every human being and that we need to remember and celebrate.

And it’s that communing with being alive, that Jesus needed to do, before immersing himself in the depths of horror. We need to remind ourselves what it means to be wonderfully and fearfully made. That’s what Lent is for. And it’s not about taking on all these extra things [...] I’ve a thing from Phil actually, he’s got a fast we can all join in on, something we can all do, but it should be relatively easy, it should be straightforward, it should be a celebration of life, not a hardship, not hard work. We’re not proving to God that we love him by beating ourselves up or doing things which are horrid or difficult because “God loves us to do things that are horrid and difficult” – no He doesn’t! God rejoices in us being fully alive. The glory of God is a human being fully alive, like Jesus was.

Have you ever been caught unawares if you’ve been standing waiting for a procession, or standing in a crowd or in a queue and you suddenly realise that you are tense? You’ve been holding yourself in preparation and suddenly you think “Oh I’m tense”, and you rock gently from foot to foot and something clicks and your buttocks let go. It’s that unclench moment – “Oh”.

Now I think that’s as close to the repentance experience as anything. That “oh” and let go, that’s repentance. That’s allowing ourselves to be turned round. It’s a almost subconscious

recognition that God is in charge. “Oh”. It’s a slight giving up, “alright God, I give up, I’ll be good.”. “Oh”, that letting go, that letting God. It’s not something you can earn, it’s not something you can achieve by working at. It’s something as the mystics would tell you is what God does to you when you give God the opportunity. An opportunity to cause us to relax into fullness of life.

Sometimes it’s a surprise. “I never realised it would be so good.” “I never realised I was so tense.” “I never realised that God was there.” “Oh, there you are.”

How do we get to repent like that? We create the opportunities. You can’t make it happen any more than you can make Grace happen. We can’t buy it and sell it. We can’t cash it in. We can’t tick the boxes until we get a full house and cry “Bingo!”

We can gently prepare our hearts to be filled. We can behave consciously what our subconscious intuit, that God is there. We can choose those things. We can meet God halfway. And that’s the kind of fast that I propose to you as we make this journey. A gentle re-evaluation and letting go, that recognises places in our lives where the tensions have built in us. Where the worries and concerns and terrors have grown in us. A fear of infection, fear of other people, fear of catching Covid, fear of dying. All of those things have gathered around us like storm clouds, sometimes without us even being conscious of what’s happening. And it’s time now to be still and take stock and let go and unclench. Let it pass. Let our celebration of life and love and diversity, in the things around us, in all the things that God has made, and in the love of Christ laid out for us. Let that make a difference again and draw us back into relationship with God and each other. Unclench, let go. Let’s make our journey together to Easter.

In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Fr Iain spoke without notes. His sermon was typed up by Adrian Vincent from the church Facebook video. 21 February 2020.

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