

Sermon, Ash Wednesday

Brookton, Beverley, Quairading & York, 13th and 14th February, 2024

We have just concluded the Season of the Epiphany. Epiphany means manifestation and the Season is true to its description, whereby through the weekly readings we have learned about how, and to whom, Jesus and his purpose/mission is manifested. You will recall the Season commences with the visit of the Wise Men from the East. Herein, we are reminded that Jesus, a Jewish baby, born to be the Messiah (Saviour) of the Jews is also the Christ (the Anointed One) for the Gentiles, the non-Jews. This baby, this act of direct intervention of God in human affairs by becoming fully human, whose birth is celebrated at the Incarnation, Christmas Day, had come not only to reconcile and redeem God's chosen people, the Jews, but to reconcile and redeem to himself all people; gentiles, such as us included. The wise men come from afar and from a different civilization, thereby representing those who were not Jewish. During the period of the Season, we learn how Nathaniel is introduced and meets Jesus, how through Divine inspiration Peter is able to recognise that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and also the Son of God. Likewise, we meet the treacherous Jewish Pharisee, Saul, busily killing off and persecuting many of these "People of the Way", yet in his dramatic experience of meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus is transformed into St Paul who becomes the most energetic, wonderful and well-travelled disciple and apostle for Christ.

During the Season of the Epiphany, we have moved from the joy and excitement of the Incarnation, a particularly intimate Jewish story, to coming to recognise and understand that there is much more to Jesus' birth. It is of course, as we know, intrinsically connected to and relates to Jesus Christ's great act of love, grace, redemption, and reconciliation; dying on the Cross so that all humanity may be one with God.

Given the significance of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection it should be no surprise that over time Christians have developed a Season before it which is given over to preparation of ourselves for it. This is what we call Lent. Therefore, tonight I thought I might touch on some aspects of Lent which speak of the importance of its observance and of which in our own time it has become too easy to overlook, ignore, or even forget its significance.

Lent is the season of spiritual preparation before Easter. In Western churches, it begins on Ash Wednesday. During Lent, many Christians observe a period of fasting, repentance, moderation, self-denial, and spiritual discipline. The purpose of the Lenten season is to set aside time for

reflection on Jesus Christ—to consider his suffering and his sacrifice, his life, death, burial, and resurrection. During the six weeks of self-examination and reflection, Christians who observe Lent typically make a commitment to fast, or to give up something—a habit, like smoking, watching TV, swearing, or a food or drink, such as sweets, chocolate, or coffee tea, soft drinks. Some Christians also take on a Lenten discipline, like reading the Bible regularly, undertaking a Lenten Study, and spending more time in prayer to draw nearer to God. Those who are stricter observers of Lent might not eat meat on Fridays, often opting for fish instead. The goal of these spiritual disciplines is to strengthen the faith of the observer and develop a closer relationship with God.

Early Christians felt the importance of Easter called for special preparations. The first mention of a forty day period of fasting in preparation for Easter is found in the Canons of Nicaea (AD 325). It is thought that the tradition may have grown from the early church practice of baptismal candidates undergoing a forty day period of fasting in preparation for their baptism at Easter. Eventually, the season evolved into a period of spiritual devotion for the whole church. During the initial centuries, the Lenten fast was very strict but has relaxed over time. This forty day period of Lent is based on two episodes of spiritual testing in the Bible: the forty years of wilderness wanderings by the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt (Numbers 33:38 and Deuteronomy 1:3) and the Temptation of Jesus after he spent forty days fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). In the Bible, the number forty holds special significance in the measurement of time, and many other important events revolve around it. During the flood, it rained for forty days and forty nights (Genesis 7:4, 12, 17; 8:6). Moses fasted on the mountain for forty days and nights before God gave him the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:18; 34:28; Deuteronomy 9). The spies spent forty days in the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:25; 14:34). The prophet Elijah travelled for forty days and nights to reach the mountain of God in Sinai (1 Kings 19:8).

In Western Christianity, Ash Wednesday marks the first day, or the start of the Season of Lent, which begins forty days prior to Easter (Technically 46, as Sundays are not included in the count). Adherents attend Church on Ash Wednesday when the priest distributes ashes by lightly rubbing the sign of the cross with ashes onto the worshippers' foreheads. This tradition is meant to identify the faithful with Jesus Christ. In the Bible, ashes are a symbol of repentance and death. Thus, observing Ash Wednesday at the start of the Lenten season represents one's repentance from sin as well as Jesus Christ's sacrificial death to set followers free from sin and death. While the Bible does not mention the custom of Lent the practice of repentance and mourning in ashes is found in 2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1; Job 2:8; Daniel 9:3; and Matthew 11:21.

Prayer accompanies fasting as a historic tradition of Lent. We should pray to improve our communion with God and strengthen our spiritual discipline during the preparation of Easter Sunday.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." ~ Philippians 4:6

"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ~ Matthew 26:41

Fasting is a well-known aspect of Lent, inspired by the fast of Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness. Christians partake in fasting to increase their self-control over worldly desires, such as food.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ~ Matthew 4:1-4

Giving or helping others is also a tradition of the Lent season, inspired by the command of Jesus to "love your neighbour as yourself." While we should likewise give to others in love throughout the entire year, an extra emphasis is added during the time of Lent.

"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." ~ Hebrews 13:16

"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." ~ Philippians 2:4

If you are to keep a good Lent what might be your experience, your reward? Greater intimacy with God is the reward of sacrifice. His love and one's salvation are not reliant on denying oneself chocolate or beer, but idolatry stands in the way of worshiping the one true God. These forty days are set aside to praise and worship the Lord; to read the Bible more, and to pray more often. Christians who observe Lent correctly anticipate deeper intimacy with the Lord, which is the blessing; they do not expect rewards.