

Wednesday 17 February 2021 - Ash Wednesday

Sermon Notes

Today's Bible Readings

- Joel - a clarion call for the people to 'return to the Lord, for he is gracious and merciful'
- Matthew - part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus warns us against self-righteousness and wanting to impress others

Lent and the pandemic

- Lent is different this year, even from 2020. In a way the whole of the last year has been like an extended Lent: but instead of us voluntarily giving up something (often quite trivial) we've had many essential things forcibly removed from us - basic freedoms of all kinds, including seeing family, going out for pleasure etc (nothing trivial about those)
- So this is not the time to give up anything else
- But it may be the time for us as followers of Jesus to find new ways of strengthening our own faith and encouraging other people
- So I'll suggest some things we might do to make this Lent special, focusing on one thing I've found really helpful recently
- And I'll finish with a picture that brings Lent and the pandemic back together again

What can we do to make Lent special?

- (1) Revd Gemma has organised our Lent Lecture programme around the theme of 'Excited by ...'. Our speakers will be sharing a variety of passions and showing how they inform their own faith
- So try to make it a priority to watch the lectures and perhaps share some of the same passions
- Or, more generally, think of other things that might bring some excitement into your own life
- (2) Our online services will continue with special services planned for Holy Week and Good Friday - we may well be able to re-start in-person services again
- Before every service ask God to show you one thing in that service that he wants you to hear, or see, or reflect on - remember he knows our needs better than we do
- (3) We could do something similar for every programme we watch on television or listen to on the radio, whether it's the news or a soap or a comedy or sport - what's right, what's wrong, and why? What would Jesus think?
- (4) We could read our Bible more, and discover God's loving purposes for humanity through Jesus. If you don't know where to start why not try the Thoughts for the Day in the weekly mailing
- (5) And we should pray more, or perhaps better. Might we focus more on thanks for so many good things, or on praise for God because of his

faithfulness to us, and less on our list of our needs and wants, however worthwhile they are?

- Or could our prayers become more like conversation where we listen for God's voice
- (6) Is there someone we could do something for (a bereaved neighbour, a friend we've lost touch with, someone on their own or struggling with things) - a phone call, an email, a letter or card?

Focusing on the Bible

- As I've been preparing Thoughts for the Day over the last few weeks, it's struck me how fascinated the NT writers were about Jesus
- Paul decided 'to know nothing except Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:2), and he went on to share that knowledge in letter after letter
- Similarly each of the Gospel writers researched Jesus' life diligently, recording what had been passed on to them and putting it in their context (eg Luke 1:1-4)
- Many of us know what it is to be fascinated by a person or a topic, to want to find out more about them, to understand them better
- Are we as fascinated as that about Jesus? If so what could we do about it? If not, why not?
- One measure of our fascination would be our wanting to ask questions - and who better to ask than the clergy who love trying to answer them!

A final picture - climbing a fell in the Lake District

- Actually the location doesn't matter - it's about climbing hills generally (and definitely not about mountaineering)
- As the climb goes higher, you can look back on where you've come from and see things slightly differently - the view widens and you appreciate how the hill you're on fits into the overall landscape
- That continues, if the weather holds, until you reach the point where you're not yet at the top but you know you're about to lose that view backwards altogether
- Often the climb is easier then, but you may still not be sure what lies ahead
- Eventually you reach the top and then you can see the view over the far side of the hill - the view forwards
- Maybe this will be a picture for our Lent this year - a hard climb towards Holy Week and Good Friday, still looking back, but then the great view looking forward on Easter Day
- And we're perhaps now at the point when we can confidently think about the pandemic in the same way - we're not at the top yet, but we may be soon
- In Lent let's all hold on to the Easter hope which has been guaranteed to everyone who 'returns to the Lord' by the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ.