

The First week of Lent.

Readings: 1 Peter 3 v18- end. Mark 1 v 9- 15

As many of you may know, it was Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday in the week we have just left behind. It all seemed to me rather a non event this year. It was quite sad. For once I did not make pancakes as there was no one to share them with, so the fun was not there. There was no reminder of using up the good things before we go into Lent and I had no ashes to make from last year's palm crosses, which is a far more difficult task than you might think. More importantly, there was no sacramental Ash Wednesday Service with the solemnity of the imposition of ashes on the foreheads of all who are at the service. This is both a verbal and visual reminder of our shortcomings in both a personal and public act of repentance. For the ashes, I always use a little brown clay bowl that I made during an ordination training retreat. I use this same bowl for the water I spray on people on Easter Sunday, reminding them of their baptism and redemption. A book end of a bowl that is not particularly pretty but one made at a very special time in my life.

We often just accept and take for granted these signposts in the Christian year. We see them as a habit, or even an empty ritual, but in the last year, and in this, we have lost things that are very important to faith. It has been for many of us like a bereavement as we could not mark what is important. Perhaps it has given us an insight into the hearts of those who have in the past and present had to hide their faith from others because of persecution. During my ordination training, I think I have said before, that I spent some time in Leipzig to see the churches there. This was after the wall came down, but not so long after, that people could still sharply remember what it was like. A bitter experience.

Now following the tradition of the church, and remembering Jesus in the wilderness, we are entering into a period of Lent. In the early church, Lent was a time when people, for various reasons, made deep oblations and penitentiary commitments to God and the church. It was perhaps people who had been excommunicated from the church but with a desire to return. Or again it was a person who had come to a point of deep repentance or conversion. In the very early church, it was a time when those preparing for baptism went through certain tests laid on them by the church. This was to see if their faith was real, if they were ready to take up their cross and follow Christ. It was a time of persecution by the state, so Christians had to be prepared to die for their faith. Their Baptism took place on Easter Sunday with great celebration. Even today to have a baptism on Easter Sunday is a very special event. Some Roman Catholic Churches have revived this practice of intensive preparation before baptism during Lent and I myself have taken children through a journey through Lent. This has either ended in their baptism or permission to take Communion.

Though not as strict, we all know of church groups that follow Lent courses or devotions that end in Holy Week. As we all know In Black Combe, our Lenten ritual has been for the five churches in the parish to take it in turns to put on a lent lunch. As I found out, these are not very spartan occasions, as they come with lashings of home made soup, bread and cheese, and which can also include home made cakes. This is all laid out in the best fashion, with every one sitting down to the meal. Unlike other lent lunches I have been too, Black Combe's Lent Lunches are the most joyous occasions. I did have some vain hope of introducing a quiet spot for meditation and prayer, which I quickly abandoned, as I found it was totally impractical. Nevertheless I comfort myself with the thought that we do raise a great deal of money for Christian Aid.

Of course as matters stand, none of this will happen this year, which is very sad. I do know many churches are trying to do Lent groups on Zoom or the equivalent, but for many that will not be possible or is not happening. Yet I think it would be sad if the practices of Lent went forgotten this year, particularly if we can meet at Easter. How very special this Easter Sunday will be if we have made a journey of faith towards it. This time is about sacrifice and as we all know, it is very usual for people to express this by giving up something for Lent. This may be chocolate, sweets, wine, or one's greatest temptation. Some people fast perhaps one day in the week and use it along with prayer. We can also give space to God by choosing a book to study with prayer and meditation that will lead us deeper into faith.

All this can be hard to do alone. So I suggest to help us to do this, we could do it as husband and wife, with a partner, relatives, a friend or even friends. With the aid of the telephone and the internet, we could share with one person or even a wider group, a book to study over Lent. It may not need be the same book as we could each share what we have learned from our own particular book, offering insights to each other.

If you do not want to read a book you can look on the Church of England web site and find "Live Lent" which is a lent course you can access.

By doing study with others, it would encourage us all to keep going, as we often need this even in ordinary times never mind now. Neither does the person you choose need to be close to where you live, but someone who is spiritually close to you and someone you can trust and share with.

I believe it would be a great loss to us as individual Christians and as a wider church to miss this very important season in the church's calendar. This is not just because it is a tradition to keep Lent, but I do believe it has a serious purpose of helping us at least once a year to reflect on faith, our calling and above all bring us to repentance. Repentance is not just saying we are sorry, but the full meaning is "turning around and going in a new direction". Covid has made the world think of the direction we are going. Certainly the very real threat that global warming will cause has made many people think in what direction we are heading. Change is needed and change for the better, but to initiate change there must be a point of repentance, a recognition of wrong doing.

You may have things planned already, but if not, it is not too late to start as we have a full six weeks. I will continue to write my ramblings but if I can add something for Lent I will.

God bless you all
Angela.