

Lent 2, Year C

Today's sermon is a game of several halves, and since, unusually, I have to go nowhere else this morning, this match will run into extra time.

The first half

Lent is a time for self-examination and reassessment of priorities, and we need to do this not only as individuals, but also as a church, that is, as a group of people professing the faith of Christ born, crucified, risen and ascended. And this is a matter of the gravest importance, for it concerns the survival of this worshipping community, and of this building as a centre of Christian witness.

Today's story from Genesis tells us that before the fire of God passed before Abram, 'a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.' This is reminiscent of Moses' experience of God as he approached the thick darkness where God was. It is reminiscent of Job's experience of God, (have you seen the new film *A serious man?*) and it was Paul's experience at the gates of Damascus where he was blinded by the vision.

Darkness. Lent invites us to face this aspect of our journey towards the light of Easter. It requires us to face the terror of letting go of what stops us seeing God. Letting go of our securities, our comfort blankets, our fortresses of niceness, our efforts to try to control. We are invited to a death that involves the painful loss of things we have treasured in the sure and certain hope of life eternal—which as I have said many times before is not about some vague future, but about quality of life, in the present and therefore out of time, here and now. Paul understands this, having experienced the deep and terrifying darkness of the presence of God. It is what enables him to assure the Church in Philippi that Jesus will 'transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory'. The task of letting go of self and what 'I' want, is what the crucifixion is all about—not my will but thine. Slowly we will come to realise that 'self' is illusion. Resurrection is 'real' reality. A Buddhist message.

The Lord appears to Abram in the midst of blood and gore, in mess. Animal carcasses cut in two. Nothing nice, nothing tidy, but messy. The world is messy and it is the mess that we have to deal with. Not only do we have to deal with it in an 'if we must' kind of way, but the incarnation—in which Jesus was born in the world through Mary's pelvis and the blood and gore and placenta and umbilical cord and uterine fluids of birth—means that we are duty bound to seek out that mess. It is not enough that we come to church in our best clothes and *consume* religion: Our Lord was always criticising the Pharisees for that. We have to get our finger nails dirty. It is very difficult.

What do we need to give up and grieve for in order to do this?

The second half (*go to church door and wander through church as I speak*)

Let us imagine that Our Lord stands at the church door. What does he see?

- He might see a comfortable and affluent (in world terms) group of people who love and care for each other very much. He might wonder how they care for the people in the parish, in the world.
- He might look at who sits where in the church, and see that, by and large, the people who joined the group most recently sit at the edges, while the people who have been here longer, by and large, are in the middle. He might wonder why this is so.
- He might notice that people seem to communicate with smiles that often hide inner sadnesses that they feel unable to speak of. He might see that people are reluctant to tell each other of their deepest darkest fears, and so can not allow the transformation of 'the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory'.
- He might notice that the seating inhibits talking to each other.
- He might notice that things for children in are in a dark corner.
- He might notice that there is a lot that tells of the past.
- If he comes to a PCC meeting, he would hear that most of the energy and interest is with money, and with keeping the building looking much as it was 100 years ago.
- He might wonder why decisions are made largely by older people.
- He might wonder who will be here in 10 years' time.
- If he comes to a discussion/teaching group he would see that there is a small handful of people who take his word very seriously.
- If he looks at the parish which this church is established to serve, he might see a lot of people sitting alone watching a flickering box in the corner of the room. He might see people at night in the church car park and in the square outside the shops selling powder at vast cost for people to sniff and for others to mix with fluid to inject into their veins.

- If he looks at the parish which this church is established to serve, he might see men and women hitting each other, maybe with children standing watching. He might see children being hit, and still going to school the next day. And he might see all this in homes that are well appointed and apparently prosperous.

Our Lord might look at all this, and look at us here in this building, and think, 'ah, that's why these people are here. They are being loving and kind to each other in order to sustain them and feed them so that they can go out into the world and be my ears, and my eyes, and my hands, and my feet, and my mouth, to heal the sick, to free the captives, to tend the poor, to bind the lame, and to restore creation.'

Or would he? If he stayed longer would he perhaps see that we are being loving and kind to each other simply in order to keep us happy in the prisons that we have made for ourselves, separate from the lives of those around us who do not come to church? Would he deduce that our coming to this church for an hour or so once a week was no more and no less than a hobby like going to the gym, the golf club or the sewing circle?

The third half

For most of my working life so far I have been amongst the best educated people in the entire world. Universities of Cambridge, London, Dublin, Harvard – even Nottingham, a University that thinks it's a big name. And yet, the thoughts that stay with me are different. They are of the people who lived in small houses in the village where I was brought up, homes that I observed seemed to be very happy. The thoughts include boys and girls from a council estate in Nottingham in my church choir, who sang in Southwell, Derby and Peterborough cathedrals. The thoughts include the boys I spent time with who, should they put one more foot wrong, would find themselves inside a Young Offenders Institution. Basil Hume said 'it's true I like rogues. You never meet a conceited rogue.' And you don't.

It's easy to get sentimental about such things. In *Brideshead Revisited*, Lady Marchmain said: 'it is possible for the rich to sin by coveting the privileges of the poor.'

The fourth half

Where does all this lead us? Where does all this lead this church community?

I would like to establish a *Survive and Prosper* group to get on with what we need to do to survive and prosper. Not a group that talks, drinks tea, and then goes home, but a group that gives serious consideration to what this church must do and how to do it. If you wish to serve on this group, write your name on the sheet at the back of church. And it would be good if you would be prepared to get your fingernails dirty.

Please stand. Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Silence

Let us declare our faith ...

Instead of the prayers today:

on the card you picked up as you came in, write down

- One thing that this church most needs to do to serve the parish and the world.
- How we might do it (you're not allowed to write we need more money, or more clergy).
- Anything else you wish to write.

Please don't consult your neighbour—I want ideas from individuals. Please don't put your name on the card. I will gather the cards, and publish all the comments.

Silence

At the end:

please pray for our survival and prosperity.

Lord God of creation, stir up in our hearts the will to serve you in the world and in worship. Dispel our fears and bring healing so that Old Brampton church life may be refreshed and enriched as we offer back to you the gifts and grace you give us.