

## **Lent 1, Year B**

### **By Rod Prince**

The Church of England has produced a set of additional collects which can be said in place of those set for each Sunday. The additional collect for today the First Sunday in Lent is this:

Heavenly Father, your Son battled with the powers of darkness, and grew closer to you in the desert: help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer that we may witness to your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are now in the season of Lent, a period of forty days which mirrors the forty days we heard about today in the Gospel reading when Jesus was driven by The Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, there to be tempted by Satan, surrounded by wild beasts and ministered to by angels. In these forty days, Christians are called upon to follow in the footsteps of Our Lord on his final journey in this life, a journey that would end in desertion and denial by many of those whom he loved, a false trial, the cruellest execution imaginable and a glorious resurrection.

Lent has traditionally been marked by abstinence from meat, dairy products, sexual activity, fasting, denial of comforts and in former times and among some sects today by the infliction of pain upon oneself. In recent years the Church of England has been keen to turn the observance of Lent into more positive action. It has encouraged us to look outwards and use these forty days to contribute to the welfare and comfort of others through acts of neighbourliness, charitable giving (and I commend to you the Christian Aid programme of structured meditation and giving during Lent. The leaflets and boxes are at the back of church).

Out of these two distinctive approaches one way is not necessarily better than the other, though I personally can see no justification for the willing infliction of pain upon oneself, other than for a perverted sense of pleasure.

How then, should we structure our approach to this season? I want to offer you some personal thoughts as a guide. The season of Lent offers us the opportunity to seize this time and use it as a season of freedom, a time of release. It should not be deliberately made into a season of suffering or enforced sorrow. I do not say this to be fashionable or to deny that suffering can, in certain circumstances, have a value. I say it because it does not seem to me to reflect the reasons why the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. God's Holy Spirit did not want Jesus to endure 40 miserable days, if you will pardon the phrase, just for the hell of it. If it were so, then it would run counter to our belief in a loving God. The time that Jesus spent in the wilderness was a time of preparation; preparation for his ministry and ultimately the preparation for His suffering and His death on the cross. The task ahead was unimaginably daunting and so the preparation had to be severe. Suffering was a consequence not the end objective.

I look around me today and I see many of you whom I know have experienced, and some presently experiencing suffering. All of us will, at one time and most likely at the end of our lives, face suffering. Suffering comes to us uninvited. We not need to bid it join us. Self-imposed suffering is, quite frankly, an indulgence. There is no need for us to bring suffering upon ourselves. There is no virtue in doing so. In fact it can lead to a damaging mentality in the way we view ourselves and others. Our Lord did not die for us to suffer, exactly the opposite. He died to release us from suffering, mental suffering. The mental suffering which can paralyse us and cripple the way we lead our lives. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus releases us from the fear of death, our own death and the loss of those we love through death. The anxiety that our existence is cut off, that our identity is erased is no more. We are a post-resurrection people and our attitude to life, even during lent, must reflect this or otherwise we are not true to our Lord Jesus Christ and to the saving nature of his life, death and triumph over death itself. So, it seems to me, self-imposed suffering has no part to play in Lent.

Which leads me to the next thought that we must be wary to ensure that our practice of Lent does not become an end or a justification in itself. What we do and how we live Lent should only be a means to the end. Why is this important? Well, because Christianity, indeed all the monotheistic faiths are not, and never have been contractual. Yet, throughout the centuries our approach has been to see them as such. What do I mean by that? It is tempting for humans to believe that we can enter into a contract with God. We will follow the rules (whatever they are – and the risk is that we try to make them rather than God) in return for God looking after us in life and after life. It is the religion of the scoreboard. I do a good deed and for that I am awarded so many heavenly points which either wipe out the negatives I have scored through breaking these rules or add to my score against the day when I do something really bad

or to my final score which will be just enough to get me into heaven. For example, if I give up chocolate for Lent, or gin, or in my case whisky (which I am not giving up!) for Lent then I get 50 heavenly points on my scoreboard. It is easy to scoff, but Christianity has been plagued by this; the sale of indulgences; paying to wipe out one's sins led to the actions of Martin Luther, the formation of the protestant movement, the reformation and the Church of England. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for being so obsessed with following the rules and insisting that everyone else did the same that they lost the true calling of their faith which is the love of God through the love of others. We see it too in Islam, where some warped preachers suggest that suicide bombers can go straight to heaven by killing themselves in order to kill others.

We have no contract with our wives, husbands, family and friends only love, how can we have a contract with God? What could we offer God? Yet this way of thinking is deeply engrained in our human psyche and we must be wary of the trap it presents. So the way we live Lent must be a means to an end and not the end itself.

Lent is therefore not so much a time of giving up things but a time for letting go of things. What things? The additional collect gives us a clue. The powers of darkness. For me, the greatest threat comes from the power of darkness that lies inside us not that are external to us. Jesus knew that in order to fight the external powers of darkness he had to wrestle with the powers of darkness inside him. Yes, the devil tempted him with the promise he could rule the world but the decision to accept or reject the devil's offer would be made inside Him.

So we too, must use this period of Lent to wrestle with our nature to try to cast off those habits, thoughts, practices which separate us from growing closer to God. Not all of us can go out into the desert but all of us can set time aside to be on our own, perhaps even in the dark, when we can shut ourselves away from the distractions of the outside world, to be still, to be quiet, to listen to our inner voice, to read and reflect on the bible, not to earn heavenly points but to let the words of scripture draw us closer to God.

If we do so then as the collect says we will grow in wisdom and prayer. Not worldly wisdom, but eternal wisdom, the understanding of how we can live our lives in a way which is pleasing to God and which brings us into a right relationship with God. Nor is this just an exercise which benefits us alone. The collect reminds us that we are called to live in love and in community with others, believers, believers in other faiths and non-believers. When we grow in wisdom and prayer we become witnesses to the presence of God and of His saving love through Jesus Christ.

So how then should we structure our approach to Lent?

We must try to find time to set ourselves apart from the demands of our lives in order that we might face the powers of darkness in ourselves, grow in wisdom and prayer, and that by drawing ever closer to God we may witness to His saving love through Jesus Christ our Lord.