

## SERMON for the First Sunday of LENT

Genesis 2:15-17 + 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11  
(with ref. to Romans 5:12-19)

1/3/20

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'Clear-cut choices' seem to be the theme for today's scripture – it does not matter which you read, they each make it obvious who you should be following as far as teaching and example are concerned. You could choose Adam, who blindly believes Eve's story; she, in turn, being far too keen to listen to the reptilian advice of her neighbour. According to Paul, you could – again – follow Adam, but he reckons that is folly, so he advises the alternative Second Adam. Or, you could be very impressed by the efforts of the Devil, but maybe his offers are not what they appear? One way or another, as a human being, you can choose.

And humanity does choose – it chooses lifestyle and effort and interpretation all of the time, especially in a free-thinking democratic country such as ours. We can be as individualistic as we want within the constraints of decency and law; the more eccentric among us are tolerated alongside the bland – we are generally OK most of the time; and it is only when extremes rear their head that the consensus reacts.

Among those choices comes the element of faith. We can choose to influence these lives with a greater power, a power that is visible in all of today's readings – a power we believe to be of good, a power we believe to be of God. This additional element provides a vital component in the human that we are evolving into. We absorb, react and reflect upon the 'tempting' sense of goodness and hope that we perceive through the teachings. At least, I hope we do!

Lent provides us with a season of contemplation whereby we are encouraged to focus upon this added dimension in our lives. As far as the calendar is concerned, it is placed just before Holy Week and Easter so as to prepare us for the scale of drama we will inevitably experience at that time. It matters not whether it is chronologically correct in terms of Christ's life, but it certainly aids ours – or, rather, we hope it does. It is a gruelling six weeks, and as such could overwhelm and exhaust if acted out to the letter, but by engaging as best as possible, we will at least feel part of it all. We are encouraged to do precisely that – the question is: can we?

We began the experience last Wednesday, when – within our liturgy – we felt the reality of our frailty by the placing of ash upon our foreheads – *"remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* – simple words with profound resonance. Eve's experience with that famous apple ensures that eternal fragility and mortality, or so our scriptures would have us believe. But, did everyone experience this 'Ashing'? Whilst our numbers were OK, there were a number of known Christians who were not here on Ash Wednesday – where does that leave them in the processes of Lent's demands? A quick 'google' around the Anglican churches of this area produced only one church offering worship on this 'red-letter' day of obligation [us!]. Has Lent and its symbolism been abolished elsewhere? Has the Devil's tempting power permeated within the identity of our faith? Who can say?

For those who did attend, it gets no easier, for the liturgy spelt out what was expected of its adherents. Just as reactionary texts in today's scripture do, so we learnt that the next six weeks or so should be dominated by holiness, self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, reading and meditating – all of that alongside living and working in the real world!

Quite some task-list, so I wonder if there are any takers? It would be wonderful to focus solely on a period of deep spiritual witness, but some of us have diaries that expect too much, families that are too demanding, expectations that are a constant challenge. Somehow, we have to fit "God" into all that. No wonder not every Christian signed up to it all on Ash Wednesday.

So, what can Lent do for us – and what images, if any, can we glean from today's scripture that might help us as we not only journey through this season, but hopefully gain benefit from the experience in order that Holy Week's rich imagery truly does transcend our lives. What can we take which will enable us to look back and realise we were ready to follow the Passion of Christ?

The key image to be focussing on is the character of Christ and the qualities of His example that we could adopt. The graphic – and yet simple – imagery of our Gospel reading makes plain that distraction is all around us – distraction that is all-too-often very attractive and extremely tempting. Who would not want a delicious meal when hungry; who would not want to be immune from the pitfalls of life; who would not want to never be in need. Most of us, I expect, and here's the Devil offering us some attractive fruits from life's tree; we are all "Eves" when it comes to it!

But the Christ stays focussed – focussed upon that which lay at His heart, at the very core of His being – that which was the 'God' element within His life. We vividly see what the choice here is – the apple is not so shiny anymore – and beware of the maggot at its core. A 'Holy Lent' we are told involves self-examination: a careful look at ourselves, a careful look to ensure the influences we are taking in are of goodness and value, a careful look to prevent a reckless choice. We are, at the end of the day, the guardians of our own destiny – we can indeed choose its guiding principles. God can and does provide ample supply of such, we just need to want a share.

And when we fail to choose rightly, as far as faith is concerned, that should not exclude us forever. We learn to know the difference, we realise the consequences of choice, we seek to hopefully amend. True repentance is when we tick all of these boxes, and work resolutely to change our ways, thoughts and attitudes. Maybe our absence on Ash Wednesday was unfortunate – that will not be eternally held against us – but we do need to understand what must be done to ensure faith grows, stays firm and constantly enriches. The season of Lent provides more than enough time to enable a refreshed Adam to appear alongside Christ at His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Each individual person will have their own style of witness and will strengthen such in their own particular way – for everyone has the potential to proclaim "Hosanna!" on the day.

Lying at the core of whatever method we choose will be the key ingredients of prayer, reading and meditating upon what we were told on Ash Wednesday is "God's Holy Word." It is indeed God's, and the joy and wonder of faith is that it is all God's – an amazing, ethereal, sensuous experience that permeates the very being we are. Faith cannot be bottled or boxed up. It is alive, permeating, vibrant. It evokes sensations beyond description, and yet feels very real. It is there. It is for always. And we can be part of it. Absorbing all dimensions creates an individual who is inoculated from the serpents of this world, a person who can see far richer horizons than that which lies immediately in front of us – hopefully, that is who we would like to be.

And so we are encouraged to use this season of Lent to aim high, to grow big, to feel well. The expectation for fasting and self-denial is not by way of a punishment, but is a means of focus. The less we are distracted, the more we can become. If we truly want to be of Christ and His God, we know it is possible, we know the invitation is there, we know we can do it. We just need to want to. Our witness will provide the bedrock – our hearts will seek the desire – and our God will hopefully overwhelm.

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