

First Sunday of Lent

Homily

This is the desert, [using Godly Play desert bag] well a piece of the desert. So many important things happened to the people of God in the desert. And today we think about Jesus driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. The desert is a dangerous place. There is no food. There is no water. People die without food and water. Nothing grows there, so when the wind blows, the shape of the desert changes. People lose their way. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to. It takes courage to go into the desert.

And this is where Lent begins with Jesus in the desert and, in a sense, an invitation to us to enter the desert. For so many of us, if not all, this past year has felt something of a desert experience, barren of our usual landmarks, lonely and seemingly endless. For some it has contain real hardships through loss of work and livelihood. For others a bleak time of bereavement and grief.

I wonder if this Lent will be a different experience because of this past year?

Perhaps we need prayers that speak to us directly helping us to draw closer to God's saving love and grow in God's wisdom. Prayers that direct us through this desert landscape and build us up ready to journey on.

Each Sunday as you will know, we have a special prayer called a Collect. It is a prayer around the theme of our Bible Readings and service. Did you know that each week Common Worship, the Church of England's collection of services, also provides an alternative collect, still around the theme but a much simpler, shorter prayer; I am a fan of these alternative collects.

Take for instance last week's prayer, the Sunday next before Lent, somehow it hits the spot – short and direct:

Holy God, you know the disorder of our sinful lives; set straight our crooked hearts, and bend our wills to love your goodness and your glory ...

Refreshingly to the point, It starts where we are with God, God knows us, no use pretending, no place to hide and that I think is somehow encouraging.

So here is the prayer for this First Sunday of Lent

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

Again quite simply it says what happened to Jesus is his time in the desert – he battled with the powers of darkness and grew close to God, and then it asks for the change in us that will make us more like Jesus.

Lent can feel like the churches equivalent of an assault course or challenge, what are we doing or not doing, taking on or giving up? Are we joining a study group or reading a Lent book? This year I won't forget the Bishop's Lent Appeal. Now I am not about to discourage any of these activities just to say that perhaps, this Lent more than ever, we need to allow ourselves to keep it simple.

During this strange year of lockdowns and shielding we may have been exposed to aspects of ourselves that we (and others) would gloss over in the normal run of events, it may be that we have had to confront our fear of change, of being less in control, maybe we have been frustrated or impatient and let fly at others. These are the experiences we can bring to God and allow God's love to seep into our souls, knowing that even though we are flawed and broken, we are precious in God's sight. Maybe this is all we ever need to do.

The desert is a dangerous place, unforgiving in many ways but also revealing of the truth. We hope and we pray that we are going to be emerging from these trying times, but let us also pray that we might take with us what the Spirit has taught us during this time.