

SERMON FOR ASHING SUNDAY | 10.03.03.2019

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11; Romans 10: 8b-13; St Luke 4: 1-13

It is an abrupt change. Last Sunday we were joyously celebrating the gifts of God in creation, tossing pancakes at the 10am Mass, the Church full of colour and joy. Today it is all very different. Just as the Church is stripped right back to basics, so we are being invited to do the same: *Remember you are dust: dust you are to dust you shall return...*

But that is life. Just as we begin to take our foot off the accelerator for a bit and enjoy what is going on, something unexpected comes out of the blue. As our family looks forward to Catriona's wedding to Daniel in July, news on Friday that Daniel's mother's skin cancer has returned after a long period of remission. Angie Vinnicombe is incredibly strong, emotionally, and she is having the best possible treatment in Leeds, but of course it reminds us of our fragility. A bit of us doesn't even want to think about what might happen to her.

And it is equally true of us as people. We keep, down in the fudgy-sludge, a whole raft of unspoken guilty feelings and emotions. We don't like to admit the things we have thought, said and done and, by and large we are pretty good at keeping the lid on most of it. I watched a conversation recently when someone was swearing blind that black was white. Whatever was said to them they threw back, refusing to admit the mistakes they had made and the likely consequences. It was painful to see them going through a whole series of contortions to try to keep up appearances – even though there was a roomful of people who knew the truth. It was as absurd as it was sad.

An apology would have gone a very long way to undoing the damage but they weren't having it.

Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness is given to us to remind us that the invitation to take short-cuts is universal. Spin a yarn, use your skill to pull the wool over people's faces, tell a few untruths, conform to the world, show off, look after yourself and don't worry too much about the others: all these options are placed in front of Jesus, just as they are dangled in front of us. Taking the easy way out has always been an option but Jesus is having none of it of it.

But we aren't so strong and we aren't so moral. He can tell the devil to take a running jump and to stop testing God's patience. We want to do that – at least sometimes; at other times we will settle for an easy life.

So we have this Ashing Sunday and the start of Lent as something of a wake-up call. Is this really the best we can do? And why are we struggling anyway.

If the resurrection of Jesus from the dead lies at the heart of our faith, a pretty close second must be God's way of working with us. We are not the descendants of Noah who watched their sinful neighbours drowning in the Flood. As St Paul says in the 2nd reading, *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*. That I to say, everyone who can (and will) express what is in their hearts – out loud – will be saved. Quoting Isaiah 18: 16, *no one who believes in me will be put to shame*.

So Ashing Sunday is a wake-up call, but it is also an opportunity, the chance to say what we really believe: if I am willing to come clean about myself, I can and will be forgiven. Simple. Straight forward.

But not quite that simple for some branches of the Church. I was talking to one of our young families this week and they were talking about their experience of a Pentecostal Church which used to meet in the O2 arena – so a big concern. They were saying just how welcoming the Church was and how much fun they often had.

But in time there was a growing expectation that if they were to really get involved, really be part of the Christian family, they would have to give 10% of their income to the Church.

Why, because of the notion that only if you tithed and gave probably more than you could afford, could God bless you and give you abundantly in return. Because you probably couldn't afford it, this would be honoured by God as a sign of faith and he would bless you accordingly.

It is the old Prosperity theory.

But it isn't Scriptural and it isn't in the Bible. What does Micah tell us of God's words? *I want truth in your inward parts; I don't want your sacrifices but a pure and gentle heart. What does the Lord require of you – to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Nothing about denying your family their food so that you can broker a better net return from the Lord!*

But what about promise made to Abraham in the first reading. Doesn't it talk about bringing the first fruits of the Harvest? Isn't that a kind of tithing?

Just read the text! The gifts are not to gain something, they are the thanksgiving afterwards! 'Thank you for bringing me into the land flowing with milk and honey' not: this is my Debit Card to get in! God's gifts are never predicated on our achievements – however wonderful they are – but on the promises God has already made: this is the land which I have promised to you and to your descendants.

Ashing Sunday and Lent are about hearts, our willingness to come clean and to admit that we have messed up. It is about our ability to lay down our defences and to be straight with God and with each other that matters.

But just as the gifts of the Eucharist are open to all, so are the gifts of forgiveness and renewal. We don't have to do anything.

Yet who can fail to want to come close to God who extends his love and compassion on us so freely?

And just as Jesus was renewed by the experience of meeting the devil, so we use these days of Lent to face the challenges that our personalities present us with, honestly and with sorrow for those parts which we count as weaknesses.

Remember this: we know that God has already accepted us. All he looks for is our willingness to say openly: *O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*