



Sermon

21st February 2021

What is Lent About?

Mark 1:9-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Genesis 9:8-17

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Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. It marks the beginning of this Church season of 6 weeks leading up to Easter. A season of reflection and penitence.

Lent was originally the final preparation period for those who were to be baptised at Easter. By the fourth century, baptismal preparation was an involved process stretching over three years. At the end of those three years, these forty days leading up to Easter were a time of final preparation before the baptism by the Bishop on Easter Sunday. The forty days period was modelled on Jesus' temptation in the wilderness – his own preparation and testing before commencing his ministry.

The practice of Lent developed from there to be a time for Christians generally to grow in their faith. Our journey of being born again in Christ requires that we die with him, or as "buried with him in baptism." So as we move into Lent we hear again the account of Jesus being baptised. You will remember, I hope, that at the time of Chara and Bella's baptism in December, I said that our baptism represents dying with Christ and rising with him to new life.

The three readings we are given do all help us to understand the beginning of Lent. Yet I would say that there a number of metaphors here. It is not so much a case of mixed metaphors as perhaps intertwined metaphors!

If Lent is based on the temptation of Christ, it is logical that we hear how he was baptised and then immediately sent to be tested. So we have the themes of baptism and testing.

Peter explores this in his epistle. He recounts again a summary of what Jesus achieved on the cross. ^{v18} "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" concluding with v22 [Christ] "has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

Here is the assurance that the one we follow is victorious. He has the power to bring things to his declared conclusion. We may not like all that happens on the way, but Christ is victorious and what he says will happen.

Peter says that Christ died for sins once for all. It was a single and sufficient offering. Do you remember the words of the 1662 Communion service? "...A full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation [which means offering] and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world."¹

It does not need repetition. He is not sacrificed again at every communion service. His offering of himself was sufficient to deal the sins of all the world. In it Jesus the righteous one died for the sins of us the unrighteous. Not all people will trust in that sacrifice and so benefit from it but those who do, are saved from the judgement of God.

Here is a challenging question – do you realise that without Jesus you would face judgement for sin – failure to obey and falling short of the glory of God? So do you put your trust in Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection to save you? That is the heart of the gospel.

Baptism

Peter goes on to discuss an analogy between Noah's flood and baptism. Here we see the Old Testament reading being drawn in.

¹ BCP p255

Firstly, Noah's flood waters were a judgement which brought death to the wicked. Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives were saved in the ark from the flood waters. Similarly we are taken into Christ and will pass safely through judgement and death to life eternal.

Secondly, in baptism we pass through the waters which represent Christ's death. Going down into the water represents dying with Christ and dying to self. Coming up out of the water represents His resurrection – and our being restored to new life – born again.

Peter says it is not about washing the body from dirt - physical washing is not important. It is a symbol of what Christ has done for us and our being united with him. Hear verses 21-22 again from the English Standard Version:

Baptism, which corresponds to this [flood water], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. [ESV]

This is a difficult passage to understand. The NIV Bible Commentary says this:

The conviction of sin by the [Holy] Spirit in the human mind calls for a response of faith or commitment to Christ and his work. This is concretely and 'contractually' done in the act of baptism. Saving faith is expressed in baptism.²

How is baptism effective? It is through the resurrection of Jesus. We don't believe in a dead saviour. We believe in a saviour who died to pay the penalty and rose again to eternal life. Baptism connects us to that resurrection which is the saving power.

Why do we get baptised? Because Jesus commanded his disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Baptism is the sign of the new covenant. I remember a missionary to Nepal, telling me that the Nepalese did not object to their people converting to Christianity but they strongly objected to baptism – it was an imprisonable offence. They saw that as the significant step out of Hinduism.

Because it is the sign of the covenant, it is the condition for receiving Holy Communion which is the covenant meal. That is why, the Church has said from extremely early days, that you must be baptised to take communion.

Peter continues writing that "[Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

In the temptation, Christ showed that he would not submit to the powers of evil. On the cross, he won victory over them by dying as an innocent sacrifice. There he triumphed over them.

In the temptation Jesus was to be tested to see whether he would fall for the temptations of evil, as all the rest of the mankind have done. Mark doesn't tell us any detail of the temptation as Matthew and Luke do. In fact he covers it in one short sentence. "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."³

Forty is the Biblical number of testing and tribulation. Moses had been forty days up Mt Sinai meeting with God.⁴ Elijah had travelled forty days to Mt Sinai when he was recommissioned after the contest with the prophets of Baal. And Noah passed through 40 days of continuous rain in the ark.⁵ That needn't be taken to mean it was not forty days, rather than God chooses to use such periods for his purposes. It is a long time when you are waiting for it to end. It is long enough for things to be settled, established and changed.

All we are told by Mark is that Jesus was tempted by Satan, he was with the wild animals and angels attended him. The wild animals would not be considered friendly in Jewish tradition. Normally they would be a threat. We might remember that David described killing a lion and a bear that had attacked his flocks. Jesus was in danger spiritually and physically.

² NIV Bible Commentary Vol 2, 1994, Zondervan Publishing, p1055

³ Mark 1:12-13

⁴ Exodus 24:18

⁵ Genesis 7:12

The wilderness is a hard place. It is bleak, hot, dry and dusty. It is not sand like the Sahara desert but rock and loose grit with the occasional plant.

Forty days is a long time - forty days is a very long time in such conditions.

Mark also tells us that the angels ministered to him. That calls to mind the angel ministering to Elijah. He brought him food twice to strengthen him for the journey. As Matthew tells the story the angels minister to Jesus after the fast of 40 days. By the way, a fast of forty days is not impossible. People do 40-day fasts these days. It is about the limit of endurance before the body has used up its reserves and has to break down good tissue to survive.

So we have our practice of Lent. I don't think it is about minor inconveniences like giving up chocolate. Far better to explore spiritual disciplines which will bring you closer to God and help you choose the spirit over the flesh in the struggles we all have with temptations and sin.

And this is not a pull yourself up by your bootstraps exercise. It is not spiritual self-help. We do not "take on" spiritual exercises. We *submit* to the use of the means of grace. We do not "make ourselves better." Rather, we open ourselves more profoundly to the operations of divine grace. We do not strain to make ourselves get better. We let go, trusting God, through submitting to these means, to make us more holy.

We are mortal. We cannot save ourselves from death, or the second death. And we are sinners... in the hands of a compassionate God who seeks to save us, not leave us in the paths of destruction to which we are otherwise inevitably heading.

In this season of Lent we reflect on our journey of faith with Christ, remembering God's covenant and the sign of the rainbow. God will never again destroy the earth by flood, and water, once a way of destruction, is now a way to new life through baptism.

What might you choose to do as a way of being more open to God's work in your life this Lent?

Perhaps a new focus on **Bible reading**, or **prayer**. Maybe taking the time to sit with God in **silence**, to ask him for what you want and listen to him? Maybe you might try **fasting** this Lent. It does not have to be a fast from all food. It could be missing a meal and taking that time to pray instead.

Confession is a spiritual discipline. Most of the time, it is appropriate to confess to God alone. But sometimes we need to confess to someone else especially if we are struggling to find assurance of forgiveness.

Worship: Not just singing but practices that express the value God has to us that he is worthy of our praise and love.

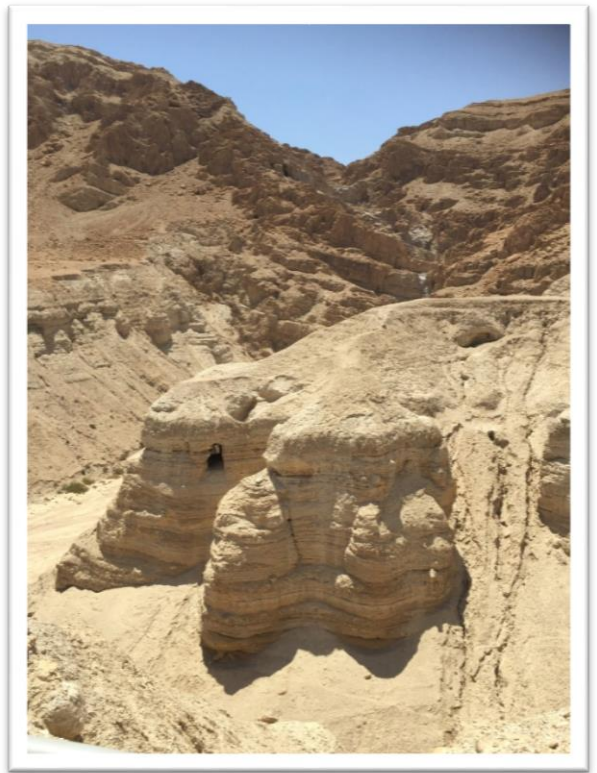
Fellowship: We need fellowship as Christians. Maybe you need to join a homegroup, or the Big Story of the Bible or Alpha.

Rest is a spiritual discipline. You might think that sounds good! So often we refuse to rest because we are so intent on either the many activities we think we have to do or we fill our rest with meaningless activity which makes it not rest.

Celebration: Yes – that is a spiritual exercise too! In the Old Testament, God actually legislated times of celebration as well as times of rest.

Serving: That can be fulfilling; it can be humbling which challenges our pride.

Generosity: This is not just giving, but our underlying attitudes towards money and possessions. Doing a Bible study on what Jesus says about our handling of money could be helpful. What about stepping up to the Biblical standard to tithing? Someone I know was struggling with not wanting to tithe. He said to God, "It's only a principle." He heard back, "Yes, and it's a very good principle!"



The Judean Wilderness by Qumran

Proverbs 11:24-25 One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. ²⁵ A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.

Generosity may mean spending less on ourselves so we have more to share. It certainly means regarding our possessions as held in trust for God's purposes. We are stewards to owners. When we break through in generosity there is a delightful joy that comes in the obedience to what God asks of us.

I wonder if one of those catches your attention? Perhaps you might profitably use it to be more open to the work of God's Spirit in you making what he wants you to be.

God bless you as you seek him. Amen.

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