

Corona Season (21.2.21)

Lent 1

REPENT & BELIEVE

Jesus' ministry was essentially a call to repentance. As he came into Galilee he proclaimed, 'The time has come: the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe the good news.' 'Repent' is a strong word. It is not the same as feeling sorry or regretful, or even being contrite; it is about making a deep inner change. To repent is to turn, to face in a new direction; repentance is an act of the will: a deep desire to change, to face a new way, to take a new direction in life – and taking steps to put this desire into effect. Feeling sorry can be the beginning of repentance, especially if it brings with it a desire to make amends. God certainly wants us to feel sorrow for our sins, but he wants more than sorrow; he wants us to change and focus our lives on Jesus. This is essentially what we try to do in Lent. Lent is about turning, changing direction, bringing our lives around, bit by bit, so that we are more and more focussed on Jesus.

'Repent and believe...'. I wonder if anyone asked 'Why?' 'Why should I repent and believe? What has this good news to do with me?' In reply Jesus might have posed another question: 'Deep down are you happy with your life? Do you feel connected with what's real and gives life meaning? Is your spirit really alive?'

Jesus came to set people free so that they might have life in all its fullness, to use St John's phrase. (John 10.10) Why should I repent and believe? Because that is the path to life; that is the way you will find

out who you truly are; that is the way you will find peace for your soul. The good news, the gospel, that Jesus proclaimed was that through him a new start was possible.

Lents come and go. Why do we observe these forty days before Easter? Why do we give things up, like sweets or alcohol, or make a special collection for those in need? What has this got to do with the rest of my life? Maybe we wonder why our past Lents, so full of good resolutions and pious practices, seem to have borne so little fruit? The answer may be that we have done these things without relating them to the supreme end of our lives, our relationship with God. Turning and facing a new way is not easy, and we really need to be convinced that it will be worth the effort. So, as we set out on this Lent perhaps we should ask how it will relate to our need for inner peace, to our search for our true selves, to our desire to have life in all its fullness. Bede Frost in his book *Lent with St Benedict*, says, 'Lent is [not a] time to decorate ourselves with pious exercises, but one for securing and strengthening the foundations of the spiritual life.'

In today's Gospel Jesus says that our foundation has to be our relationship with God: this is not about what we do outwardly, like the Pharisees who paraded their religion before the world, but about what we do inwardly, in the secrecy of our hearts, the place where only God can see. Of course, we know this, but even so, inner peace is still hard to come by. If so, we might probe a little deeper and ask how our spiritual life relates to the rest of our lives? Do we live an integrated life?

Taking Jesus as our focus we can see what an integrated life looks like. Not for him living in separate compartments: God on Sunday, work on Monday, with different values and attitudes for each. His life and teaching were one. The values of the Kingdom governed all that he did, whether alone with his companions, or before the world in his public ministry. He learnt these values in his time of testing in the wilderness, and these forty days of Lent are given to us to for the same purpose: to learn the values of God, to turn around and integrate our faith with the rest of our life.

We can see what this might mean if we look at the four traditional lenten disciplines: fasting, almsgiving, study and prayer. They can be undertaken in a more or less automatic way, as ends in themselves – the things we always do in Lent – without thinking too much about their deeper purpose, namely building deeper foundations for our spiritual lives.

We fast to discipline our bodily appetites – and not just for food. What we want so easily becomes an object of desire, of consuming passion, in a word, of worship. So we go without not to help us slim, or to cure a bad habit, but to remind ourselves of our inner emptiness that only God can fill. Each time we refuse a drink or chocolate or whatever, is a reminder that we cannot live by bread alone, but only by the word of God.

We may give alms to help the needy or to ease our conscience, but if that is all we miss the point. Almsgiving is a reminder that our worth is not measured by our wealth, but by our love. Each pound or penny we put aside for the poor reminds us that no man is an island;

God's special concern is for the poor, and our eternal destiny is inseparable from theirs.

We may study to increase our knowledge or our usefulness, or just because we like reading books, but study is not about self-improvement. We study so that the Word may dwell in our hearts. God has called us to be his witnesses; he expects us to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. Each book we read or course we attend is a reminder that God's word is the source of life.

Prayer is the way we tune in to God, the way we get on to his wavelength. We pray because God made us to pray, because he wants to communicate with each of us personally. We may want God to do something for others, but we pray first and foremost because God wants to draw us close to him and enfold us in his love. Every prayer we make is a reminder that God is love; he is to be trusted not tested.

Early in his ministry a man with the withered arm came to Jesus to be healed. We may think of him as a symbol of the deadening effect of wrong religion, of living life in separate compartments, taking away life rather than giving it; incapacitating rather than enabling. In healing him with the simple command, 'Stretch out your arm', Jesus shows the power of his Way to bring wholeness. This, says Jesus, is what God desires, that his people should be whole, able to reach out to him with their whole being. So, this Lent we might ask God to help our lenten discipline become a way to new life: 'Help me stretch out my arm to you.'