

Prayer is Oxygen - Lent 2010

Chocolate, alcohol, carbon emissions, Facebook..... what are you giving up for Lent?.

It's interesting how many people, religious and non, still see a value in this time of abstinence. We live in a culture where we can have almost anything at the push of a button or the click of a mouse. We get frustrated when it takes two whole minutes to download a song or when we have to wait for snow to be cleared from an airport runway. We don't 'do' delayed gratification, and yet waiting is part of appreciation. Think of the things we have had to wait for in our lives, perhaps things we have purposely denied ourselves; often the longer the wait, the deeper the enjoyment.

Fasting in Lent is much more of course than an exercise in self-control or a 40 day detox. We don't just give up for the sake of giving up. We let go of something which matters in our lives in order to ask ourselves what really matters. We give up something we value in order to discover what is really of value. In Lent we dare to ask ourselves that deep question we usually avoid; 'what am I living for?'.

Lent is also a penitential season. It begins with the ashing of Ash Wednesday; a reminder upon our foreheads that we are, all of us; dust; mortal; fragile. The ash itself is traditionally made from the Palm crosses of the previous year, symbolic of broken dreams

(those waving their palms on that first Palm Sunday were soon to see their Messiah and with him their dreams crucified) and failures of our past (how many of those same people stood up for their Messiah?). We need to remember that penitence isn't about humiliation; it's about an owning and an offloading of the past; it's not about guilt and shame; it's about a restoration and a healing.

Lent commemorates the 40 days Jesus spent soul searching in the desert, where he came face to face with... himself; the voices inside his head (or as the text says, the devil, the accuser). The desert is a very significant place in almost all religions. It's the place from which great leaders emerge; the law-giver Moses, the Baptist, the Christ. Although the desert is a solitary place it is the place of encounter, encounter with God and encounter with self. In the book of Hosea God says to the people 'I will lead you into the desert and speak to your heart'. The desert can also of course be a terrifying place; a place where time loses its meaning and all sense of direction is lost. A place where we are exposed to the extremes of heat and cold and to the wild voices within us. One writer says that the desert is the place where meetings occur, and identities are lost and found

The spirit of God led Jesus into the desert to speak to his heart and to help him discover his identity; his life's work, what it was that God was calling him to live for? In order to answer that question Jesus had first to listen to his hungers. We all have deep hungers within us - hunger for intimacy, for acceptance, for significance, hunger to be known, to be loved... the voices of the desert went straight to the heart of Jesus' hunger - Let's not forget that Jesus was fully human and so the first is the physical hunger of a 40 day fast- why not just turn these stones to bread, easy... next, his hunger for power and perhaps more accurately to gain power prematurely - why don't you just bow down, simple, and all of this will be yours. And then finally the rawest of all the hunger for love, Does God really love you enough to catch you if you were to fall?

We all face similar questions at different times in our lives. Questions which cut to the heart of who we are and what we are living for. Lent is a time for making a desert space, clearances in our own lives so that we can re-evaluate who we are and where we're going. It's a time for listening to our hungers and tuning into that deepest hunger - the need to be known and loved

Each time Jesus faced his hunger, he replied with the same three words 'it is... written'.

Jesus had memorised and trusted the words of his own sacred scriptures. That trust came from a relationship with the One who had inspired those scriptures. 40 days before, Jesus had walked down to a river where he had asked his cousin to baptise him; commission him for his life's work. And at that moment he had heard the voice of the Father. This is the Son I love, with whom I am so pleased. These twelve words had written themselves into the deepest places of Jesus' heart and these words sustained him through the many deserts of his life, including the garden of tears and the hill of crucifixion. These words gave Jesus strength to resist the temptation to compromise or diminish himself

Those same words spoken from a father to a son are also meant for every one of us. Our Father created each one of us for great things; for the greatest thing... love; relationship with him.

Lent is a time to give time to God; to deepen that relationship; to discover, or to remind ourselves again, that God loves us and is pleased with us. But how do we know this, how does the power of this move from here (head) to here (heart)? There is only one way I know; to give time; to still ourselves, to search; to pray. The prayer 'God I don't know if you're even there but if you are can you find me?' is a prayer God answers

and the prayer that can change everything. It's got to be a persistent prayer; not a whim; a dedicated prayer of searching.

As a church we want to prioritise this search; we want to give centrality to prayer because without it we will only scratch the surface of the adventure and the intimacy and the work God is calling us to. Prayer is the oxygen of a church. Without it we will die. We want to teach about prayer throughout this time of Lent, we want to ask our small groups to explore what prayer means, we want to launch a monthly church prayer meeting where we can seek God's way for us, we want to encourage listening to God through a contemplative group, and much, much more. Often like Lent, prayer can feel burdensome or guilt-laden or a drudge. But just as Lent is not about any of these things, neither is prayer.

On your pew you should find a little strip of stickers, dots. I heard recently of a church where everyone was given a little sticker to put on their watch. Most of us look at our watches regularly throughout the day and what I'd like us to do now is to take one and stick it on our watch, or if we don't have a watch, on something that we will use or look at daily. Every time you see this little sticker I'd like you to remind yourself of those 12 simple words 'you are the child I love, with whom I am so pleased'.

The beginning of prayer is awareness, waking up to the presence that surround us and to the many ways in which God is trying to speak. This Lent may a little dot remind you of and lead you to the One who loves you and in so pleased with you, the one who will lead us through this and any desert.