

Sermon St. James, Cambridge - Lent 1, 17 February 2013
The Revd Jutta Brueck

Deuteronomy 26.1-11

Ps. 91

Romans 10.8b-13

Luke 4.1-13

I wonder when the tradition of 'giving up things for Lent' started?

It was certainly around when I grew up. I enjoyed going to Church as a child and loved Lent, Holy Week and Easter. By Holy week the school holidays had started and attending all the special Holy Week services was very special. And then, there is the memory of reaching Easter and taking a shoe box full of sweets and chocolates out from under my bed, which I had filled during the season of Lent. Christ was risen indeed!

Giving up chocolate and sweets for Lent when you are a child seems a good way of introducing the Lenten discipline of fasting, but what happened to the overall discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving which are long standing, important religious disciplines, rooted in Scripture?

As such, on Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of Lent, the gospel reading from Matthew assumed that prayer, fasting and alms-giving are part of our regular religious observance, and it was about how to pray, fast and give alms. Geoffrey preached about the fact that among Jews and Muslims these disciplines are still part of their normal religious observance.

They used to be in the Christian tradition and in early centuries, their observance was taken very seriously, with the Lenten fast only allowing one meal per day, which could not include either meat nor dairy products.

What has happened that for most of us now, Lent means giving up a creature comfort – and admittedly - that can be quite challenging, but why do we no longer expect to pray, fast and give to those in need in a way that would require some serious changes for these forty days in the run-up to Easter?

I don't know what the answer is – but the question seems an important one to ask!

Is it to do with the fact that we feel so comfortable with our lives and relationship with God that we no longer see the need to go out of our way to make a special effort to be attentive to God's voice in preparation for Holy Week and Easter?

Is it that our lives have become so complicated and demanding that's it's too much to ask of people who are faithful and committed all year round?

Is it that we don't really see the benefit of praying, fasting and giving in addition to what we normally give?

Or is it to do with the fact that we have a much more positive image of God, where we stress that God is loving, generous, merciful and compassionate – rather than a God who is severe and punishing. I very much hope that we have this positive image of God – especially, as I am one who always says to you – remember you are beloved children of a loving God, father or mother- which one you prefer. But does having this image of God mean we no longer see the need to observe the ancient disciplines which have helped Christians across the centuries to grow in faith and knowledge of God, which have helped them over-come self-deception and other temptations, so they could live more freely as children of God?

What is Lent about? It's about removing some of the safety nets we put in place to cope with the pressures and challenges of life, safety nets which may not be healthy – neither for the body nor the Spirit, safety nets that replace us turning to God, relying on God, waiting and trusting.

But –despite the language of sin and repentance we hear in our liturgy and prayers, lent is not so much about self-testing and breast-beating, but much more about taking stock and asking ourselves questions like 'What are we for?' What do we depend on? Where does our sense of self-worth come from'?

Those were the questions Jesus was facing when the Spirit led him into the wilderness. Of course, his was an extreme form of fasting – forty days and nights without food, on his own, with his thoughts and prayers. He was led into the wilderness immediately after his baptism, after his great moment of affirmation from God, his Father. *'This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him'*. What a calling, what a responsibility! And Jesus must have been in that desert praying – father, show me the way, show me how you want me to win the hearts and minds of people and set them free from slavery and the hold of evil. How tempting for him to think that he had the power to meet the needs of all who are hungry; how tempting to think he could put an end to the oppression of the Roman empire and anyone else ...we can see how cleverly the tempting voice got right in there.

And what does Jesus rely on when he is at his weakest and most vulnerable? He clings on to scripture. He draws on his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible which he has learned by heart from a

young age. The quotations he uses are from the book of Deuteronomy, recording the struggles and teachings of the Israelites who had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

It is written 'One does not live by bread alone'. 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him' 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'.

Jesus emerges from his time in the wilderness clearer as to what he is for; what the journey ahead may entail and how he is to live out his mission as God's Son in human flesh – this journey is to live a life governed by love and complete trust in God his Father, even if that means giving up his life.

We are here today remembering and celebrating what Jesus did for us, and in our coming together in his name, we are responding to his invitation to follow him and become more like him so we become most fully who we were created to be.

Tom Wright puts it beautifully ' The Christian discipline of fighting temptation is not about self-hatred, or rejecting parts of our God-given humanity. It is about celebrating God's gift of full humanity and, like someone learning a musical instrument, discovering how to tune it to play it to it's best possibility.'
(*Luke for Everyone, p.45*).

As the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, may the Spirit guide us to make use of the ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting and giving to those in need that we may grow in knowledge of ourselves and of God – more able to live as God's beloved children.

Amen.