

## **Ash Wednesday, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017 St James' Church, Cambridge**

The Old Testament prophet Joel says *The day of the Lord is coming*. Surely a reason to rejoice, to celebrate, to party...? Actually, no, because Joel goes on to say: *the day of the Lord is coming – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!*

I can hear a voice within me saying “I thought that faith was all about good news; this doesn’t sound like good news. But it’s ok because Joel is part of the *Old* Testament and so isn’t in the New Testament where we read the good news, Gospels.” I don’t think we can let ourselves off so lightly.

The occasion of Joel's preaching was a plague of locusts that had devastated the country – not an uncommon thing in that region at that time. To Joel, the invading army of locusts was akin to God’s judgement day. Joel calls of repentance and a season of lament. He says God will pour a divine spirit upon them all and restore them. This cosmic upheaval is typical of the apocalyptic literature we find at that time, recorded in part in the Old Testament.

Joel asks the question *Where is your God?* A question that might have been asked at various points in our history. Perhaps that is what we might ask ourselves this Lent. *Where is my God?*

I wonder what the actors and production team felt like at the Oscars the other night, when they were incorrectly told that they had won the Oscar for best film, only to be told moments later “sorry that was a mistake, the award goes to a different film”. What a blow! What a major disappointment! For a few glorious moments I imagine those people would’ve have felt wonderful, they would have felt on top of the world; they would have felt like winners. But they weren’t; it was a mistake; they weren’t winners. I’m sure that there have been times when we have felt like winners, where we have felt vindicated in all that we do, maybe even invincible, when things were going well, where nothing could stop us. But there are also those times when we most definitely have not been winners; we’ve been

mediocre, average, just one of the many, perhaps we've often felt like second-best or perhaps we've felt like failures.

We are only human; we want to win – to do well, to be content, to know joy and peace. But we also know that life can't be like that all the time. A British pastor and author, David Day wrote a book on preaching appropriately entitled *Preaching with All You've Got*. Day says a preacher should be able to stand before his or her congregation and say, "I am who I appear to be."

What I am might be something less than what I'd like to be, or what I'd like to look like to others.

Earlier in Matthew at 5:3 we read, "How blessed are those who know their need for God." Those who demonstrate active righteousness in response to God's gracious invitation to relationship have in common their recognition that they need God. Again from Matthew: "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12).

Lent is a time to pay attention to our contradictions, and not necessarily to wish that we weren't like we are, but instead to recognise ourselves. If we can recognise who we are we probably stand a better chance of knowing God too. To be able to recognise ourselves in the midst of things going wrong, in the throes of pain and hurt, is a real challenge; but its then that we begin to know something of our need for God.

Joel wanted people to re-connect to God. It's a desire among church leaders today.

*How can we get people to re-connect to God?*

*Where do you connect to God? In a Church, with family, up a mountain, walking in fields, enjoying nature; maybe when you hear laughter, crying, a baby gurgling, perhaps in the news?*

Our journey through Lent is about reconnecting. Reconnecting to those initial feelings that brought us here (church) in the first place. There was a time when your faith was new, raw, unhindered, untainted, but full and brimming with questions and

desires. A searching for answers and a need to experience. Perhaps it still is; if so, that is good news.

There's a strong image of Lent as wilderness. I remember driving through the desert in Arizona some years ago, with just one companion. I was enthralled by what seemed like an endless horizon, no interruptions. We drove a long time before we saw another vehicle. It was awesome but also a little scary. What if we broke down— who would know? What would happen to us?

We don't need to go into the desert to be in the wilderness. Often the wilderness is internal.

Our wilderness is our hearts – that's where we might go to meet our temptations, to fully examine ourselves and to hear God's word.

Last year, Emma and I visited The Shakespeare Centre in Stratford Upon Avon. Part of the exhibition was to illustrate how global the popularity of Shakespeare was, not only a British phenomenon but a major influence on art and literature around the world. There was a poem written by a Muslim poet, Iqbal Muhammad, which included the words: *Though your own self remained hidden from the sight of all/ yet, your own eye could perceive the world unveiled.*

That contrary experience of remaining hidden yet perceiving the world is what Lent seems to be about. We might feel that Lent is a constraining time, a time for giving up some of our freedom. It might be the opposite. It might be a time for opening up and freeing ourselves. Letting ourselves *be ourselves*.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he urges the people of Corinth to *open wide your hearts, there is no restriction in our affection for you, open wide your hearts.* Perhaps that is what God is saying to us. *Don't restrict yourselves, open wide your hearts, let me in.* A closed heart is a wasteland, nothing can grow, nothing can live or love, a closed heart is a wilderness.

There is a wide-ness in God's mercy, as we sometimes sing, but it scares us. Perhaps we do need to be led into the desert occasionally to feel that utter and complete wideness, of a love without end, to really see that God's love is boundless. Perhaps Lent is such an occasion.

At the end of Lent, on Palm Sunday, we will walk with Jesus into Jerusalem, the city where crowds welcomed him on the Sabbath by spreading palm branches under his feet, and where he was executed by the week's end.

Lent is a journey towards the cross. And towards a tomb, and the mysterious, unending joy of those who found that tomb empty. Lent is a journey from ashes to fire, from the desert to the cross, from not knowing who you are to a moment of discovery – right or wrong, winner or loser. Lent is a time for knowing who you are.

Revd Steven Rothwell