

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection –First Sunday of Lent – 26th February 2023

Canon David Pickering

The words of Jesus from today's Gospel:-

It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

And

'Away with you Satan, for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

And now, words from the Collect for Ash Wednesday:-

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts.

All are key texts for the First Sunday of Lent: guides to begin this penitential season - and vital preparation before we can truly celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Day.

As we might well expect, our Gospel reading today, as in each of our three-year lectionary cycle, is the temptation of Jesus. Today we heard Matthew's account of the three temptations. Last year we had Luke's version: the same three, but with the second and third in reverse order. Next year we'll hear Mark's - a brief, one-verse summary. But the three temptations in Matthew and Luke, and especially the words of Jesus, should set us up with a pattern for our own penitential discipline during Lent, a pattern that will help us as we look to rise to a new life at Easter.

Down the centuries there have doubtless been many very saintly reflections focussing on the nature of Jesus's temptations. But this morning I'd like to share a few thoughts on the words of Jesus himself. This is as much a gentle reminder to myself, as to anyone else, of what Lent is fundamentally about: a reviewing and resetting of my relationship with God. In some ways this seems to be what's happening with Jesus in the Gospel reading today. As he entered a crucial stage of his ministry he may have been struggling to come to terms with his identity.

Tempted to turn stones to bread, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8 verse 3, "***One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God***". Yes, he tells the Tempter, to live, we may need food for the body, but above all else, God our Creator gives life itself. When we decide to give up anything for Lent we should be assessing what's important for our daily living in the light of our relationship with God. How much is He the foundation and priority of our lives? Is He the One from whom all else stems in all our daily interests and actions? *Every word* of God, wherever it comes from, scripture or elsewhere, is what makes our lives real and whole.

Placing God as the top priority in our lives is shown again in Jesus's response to the second temptation. "***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***" We may not seek to jump off high and dangerous places, but we do sometimes live very near the edge in our relationship with God. The devil seems to be pushing things to the edge when he cites scriptural passages. Yes, God will always protect and care for us, but we cannot live by scripture alone, and especially not by individual verses taken out of context. The recent sexuality debate in the Church has shown that living by selective scripture alone we can be on a dangerous edge. We need to recognise that today we know far more about our human make-up, physical, psychological, emotional and behavioural, than the scriptural writers, perhaps even more than Jesus himself knew or understood. Our use of scripture is the foundation on which should be built the reasoned knowledge that has evolved down the centuries, and the understanding from this in an ever-developing tradition.

Lent is the time for us to reassess how we understand and see God as the priority in our lives. This year, for our Lent course we'll be using John Bell's book, *Ten things they never told me about Jesusa beginner's guide to a larger Christ*. Our focus will be on how God who was in Jesus the man can be more at the centre of our

lives, and for many of us, prayer and worship are the key places where we meet him.

The reaction of Jesus to the third temptation is, ***Away with you Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*** If God is to be the priority and centre of our lives we need the sustenance of His grace that comes through worship. Lent gives us the opportunity to re-examine and refocus our devotional life. We can learn a great deal about our relationship with God by making time to reflect on our part in the worship of the Church and on our own personal prayer life. We might need to remind ourselves of how in Word and Sacrament we're celebrating all the saving acts of God, seen in the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we come together in Eucharistic worship, whether that's in person or by Zoom, God in Christ is made present among us.

In our personal prayer life too, Lent is a time to take a fresh look at how, when and where we pray, asking, *Where does prayer fit into my daily routine?* A good prayer to keep in mind for Lent is the collect for Ash Wednesday so I make no excuses for quoting it in full:

***Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
Who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.***

It could be a good start to take each line, slowly, one at a time, reflecting on the richness of its meaning. But for this morning, let's look at just a couple of lines. Yes, God is *almighty* in all and every way beyond our comprehension. His everlastingness, to quote Paul Tillich, ***has no beginning and no end.*** (*The Shaking of the Foundations*) And does God really *hate nothing* that he has made? Yes he

does not hate, and nor should we, especially in a world where there is so much hatred. If God has made us in his image, as Genesis proclaims, then we should hate nothing or anyone he has made. A tall order perhaps, to which we can only come anywhere near by the grace of God, and that will only come through prayer and worship.

Thomas Cranmer prescribed this prayer to be said every day during Lent following the Collect. Common Worship suggests it might replace the Post Communion Prayer, which Jamie has agreed to for today, and perhaps we may hear it on other Sundays during Lent as well. I hope we might all enrich our Lenten time by using it at least once a day during this penitential season. Have a good Lent!

Amen.