

Beginning the Lenten journey

A sermon preached by Rev Charles Draper in St Peter's on the first Sunday in Lent, 14 February 2016.

Leaving church on Ash Wednesday evening, we had a conversation about how to greet each other at the beginning of Lent. We say Happy Christmas and Happy Easter, but Happy Lent doesn't seem quite right! But have a miserable Lent would be even worse! We decided that have a good Lent was best.

But some of the language around Lent can be quite off putting. Discipline, self-denial, fasting – we may ask - why do we need this? Doesn't God love us as we are? It's not as if we have to placate an angry deity, or satisfy a disapproving God – didn't Jesus promise us abundant life – life to the full?

It's my belief that Lent is an invitation to become more truly ourselves – to discover more fully our true selves – what God made us to be. That is how we find abundant life – life to the full. But it may require some quite hard self-examination, and some quite deep repentance to get there.

This may be what the Temptations story in our Gospel reading is all about. The three temptations in the story are quite familiar to us – in today's language we might call them money, popularity and power. These are temptations we would all recognise today. There is of course nothing wrong with any of these things – there is nothing wrong with having money, nothing wrong with being popular, nothing wrong with having power. But it is when we pursue these things for their own sake that we can end up doing a lot of harm – to others - and to ourselves.

When Jesus says "no" to these temptations, says "no" to pursuing wealth or popularity or power, and pursues instead the path of compassion, truthfulness, and humble service, he is finding his true self. It will be a much harder path – but a path in which he is true to himself, and a path in which therefore he is living his life to the full.

Not many of us live life to the full in quite that way. It is natural for us to seek financial security. It's natural for us to want people to like us. And it's natural for us to want to be in control. And again, there is nothing wrong with those things. But it's very easy for these things to take over, and to become what we live for.

To put it a different way, we all have a tendency to put a lot of work into protecting our ego – our sense of self-worth, our sense of our own importance. We like people to respect us and look up to us. But when we are anxiously protecting our ego through the things we say and do, we are not living life to the full.

The season of Lent invites us to something better. We are invited to find and learn to be our true selves – to be the people God has made us to be. But finding our true selves and learning to be our true selves is not easy – it's a demanding journey.

It involves self-awareness, understanding ourselves and facing ourselves truly, being honest with ourselves about what is really going on inside us. And it involves the willingness to change, sometimes being stripped down, learning to let go of our pride and our need to defend ourselves, or rather defend the image we feel other people have of us, learning instead to be content to be ourselves and not to be afraid to let others see us as we really are.

Self-examination and repentance are two words that come up in the season of Lent – words that sound unattractive and unappealing! But look again, and you realise what we are talking about is self-awareness and the willingness to change and to grow. Nothing to do with being miserable or feeling guilty – but rather, again, an invitation to discover our true selves, and to learn to live life to the full.

But of course Lent is only six weeks, and this is a journey that will last a lifetime, with many ups and downs, sometimes making progress, sometimes seeming to go backwards. The journey to find our true selves is not something we can plan – we do not even know yet what the destination will be, let alone when and how we will get there. So meanwhile, on the way, it is very important that we accept ourselves as we are now

and accept we haven't got there yet! You know that saying – “Be patient with me – God hasn't finished with me yet!”

We are unfinished, we all have a long way to go on this journey. So just as we are called to love others as they are, so we are called to love ourselves as we are, not as we would like to be. Love ourselves, accept ourselves, nurture ourselves as we are, just as we are called to love and accept and nurture others as they are.

And that itself will help us on our journey – helping us to be our true selves, even when we are aware how flawed, how needy, how mixed up and muddled we are inside.

And if that's true of us, it's true of the church as well. I wonder how many of you watched War and Peace? Or maybe if any of us have read the book! We had an interesting letter to the clergy from Martin Gorick our archdeacon this week. He wrote this:

“I wonder which character in War and Peace is most like the Church of England? Idealistic, bumbling Pierre, easily led astray but eventually finding enlightenment? Prince Andrei, the tragic hero, whose obedience and sense of duty ties him in knots? Faithful, put upon Princess Marya, whose loving heart still wins through, bringing salvation to many?”

I don't know what you think. For me it's obviously Pierre – idealistic, bumbling, muddled, but eventually finding enlightenment!

That's not a bad picture of the church. Again as a church it's good to be self-aware. We need to be ready to look at the things we do and sometimes ask the hard questions – why do we do the particular things we do – what is their purpose and how well are they achieving that purpose? And that of course applies to every part of church life. For us, the whole Shaping Our Vision process, and our Lent Course on our Vision Statement will raise some of these kind of questions – an appropriate thing to do in the season of Lent.

But whatever our answers to those questions, we need also just to love our church and love each other as we are. And whenever we feel like Pierre a little unsure about where we are going and what is the way ahead, we can be sure that God is still there, leading us and guiding us. And that just as God loves us as individuals as we are, God loves us corporately as a church as we are too.

So to sum up, Lent is a challenging time – a call to self-awareness and a call to be willing to change – both for us as individuals and for us as a church. But it's never about making ourselves feel guilty or ashamed, rather it's an invitation to become our true selves, so we can learn all the more to live life to the full. And we can be sure that God's love is unchanging – He loves us and accepts us as we are, not as we one day will be. And He calls us to keep loving and accepting ourselves and each other, in the same way.