

Awareness of God's presence

A sermon preached by Rev. Viv Bridges on the First Sunday of Lent, 22 February 2015 in St Peter's Wolvercote. **Reading:** Mark 1.9-15

Today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus had to go through a time of trial, of temptation, before he started his ministry. Mark doesn't give much detail about Jesus' temptations, but he makes it clear that it was the Spirit that drove him into the wilderness.... it wasn't something that Jesus chose, it was forced upon him.

It has become a tradition for Christians to try to experience something of what Christ went through during Lent. For some people these 40 days are a time of fasting and not just denial of food, but of other things that tempt us most strongly away from our focus on God. This 'self-discipline' can be very productive, but only if, by turning away from those things that usually demand our attention, we find ourselves focussing more on God. It's no use giving up chocolate if we spend our time in constant misery, or eating more biscuits instead. It's no use watching less TV if we spend our time complaining that we're missing our favourite programme. For some people, then, *giving up things* in Lent is not the best discipline, the best way forward. A much better discipline is to *take up* something that enables us to focus on God, to spend more time with him, and in this way face and overcome some of the worldly things that tempt us away from him. We could do this in a whole host of ways – that are actually different forms of prayer.

BUT - I know that the encouragement to *pray* more fills some people with fear; 'I don't know how to pray', I often hear people say. I believe that this fear and lack of confidence are due to much misunderstanding about what 'PRAYER' is.

People sometimes think that there is a sort of 'grading' system, or 'levels' that one must achieve in prayer...a feeling that some sort of deep, mystical, contemplative prayer is the only sort of prayer that really matters, ... or that at least one must be able to spend considerable lengths of time in silence. So if they can't manage any of this, then they feel they will never be able to 'pray'.

Don't let anyone ever try to convince you that this is right!

There is an infinite number of ways of 'praying' - because 'prayer' is something that is personal to each and every one of us. It is, first – whatever makes us aware of God's presence with us, and then – whatever *deepens* our relationship with him.

God longs to have a loving relationship with each one of us. He holds out his hand of love to everyone. He is in the love that we experience in our lives, although people may not realise this. And he invites us in to a very special relationship with him through his Son, Jesus Christ.

But 'relationship' exists when it works both ways, so we come into real relationship with God when **we respond** to his offer of love. But, we have to be aware of God's presence in our lives before we can respond to it and this is often very difficult. God is, of course, always with us, but we often not aware of it. As I think I've commented before – God doesn't seem to speak to us directly, or ring us

on our mobile phones, or send us emails, or messages on Facebook. But there is no doubt that many people do experience his presence with them.

Some people seem to have been aware of God all their lives. Exactly how is difficult to explain, it's something very deep down, a subliminal experience, but it's undeniable, and is usually shown to be very real by the way they respond to this. Some people have very real, often quite sudden, spiritual experiences. They can also sometimes be difficult to explain, but they are very powerful, and very real.

But I suspect that, for most people, their experience of God is very gradual, very gentle and almost indiscernible. People sometimes say 'I don't really know why I come to church.' But they come! *Something* draws them. Yes – it may well be that they come to chat with other members of the congregation, or for the coffee!

But God moves in mysterious ways and we should never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to move us in what seems to be 'just chat' or to work through the people who make the coffee and clear way afterwards!

We can feel close to God in many different situations: it may be when we think of someone we love, or when we are rejoicing in God's creation - walking, gardening, listening to or making music, looking at a painting, work of art, listening to or reading poetry or prose. When we are helping other people God may feel very close - or in worship, in *saying* 'prayers' (the Daily Office, perhaps), or sitting in silence.

People often experience God in times of trouble or distress. In the darkest of times, people sometimes say 'I felt God there holding me together', or 'I felt God's presence through the people who looked after me'. It may be in a moment of reconciliation – when we have acknowledged and said sorry for something that we have done wrong, and experienced forgiveness (and of course, penitence is an important theme in Lent).

It may even be in QUESTIONING about God. When we have questions or doubts about him it's probably God himself putting them there.

What I'm trying to say is that *anything* is possible with God – he may make himself known to us in an infinite number of ways, so we should never be afraid to acknowledge anything that seems to us to be an awareness of God.

Perhaps, then, something we could do in Lent if we're not sure how we should pray is to take some time (sitting quietly, or walking – wherever) to think about how each one of us, as *myself* – not as anyone else – is aware of how God affects my life, or to think about moments in our lives when we were particularly aware of his presence. This 'discerning' and acknowledging the presence of God in *my* life can be a good place to start strengthening relationship with him - in other words, a good place to start praying.

It might actually be a good thing for anyone, whatever point they may be in their 'walk with God', to take a moment to move away from familiar, routine, patterns of prayer, to think afresh - how *do* I

recognise God in my life? Is my familiar pattern of prayer being really true to that? Because an important step in praying is to respond to those times when God seems to be closest, to touch us most deeply. And it's the *responding* that matters ...not *how* we respond, but that we *do it*. Relationships only grow if they are given time and so the only *must in prayer* is to take time for God.

So – however you feel closest to God, take extra time in Lent to do it – extra time to walk, to listen to music, to attend worship, to look up some different '*prayers*', to read about someone who inspires us, to be silent, or to read the bible to get to know more about Jesus Christ. Take some time to go to an extra service somewhere, or to one of the times of silence in different churches offered through Lent. Take extra time to think about the doubts and questions you have – talk to someone about them – ask the questions. Take time to think about the things you regret, say sorry for them and accept God's forgiveness. If you have felt close to God in times of distress and pain, take time to give thanks for that, or even to visit someone else who is in distress or pain.

If you are going through a difficult time it may be that the Holy Spirit is calling you to try to bear any suffering with patience and trust.

Lent often comes across as a very negative time, but I don't believe that prayer is a negative thing, Jesus did 'go without' for 40 days in the wilderness, but this was his only possible response to the insistence of the Holy Spirit. For many people, their response to the Holy Spirit will be to undertake regimes of strict discipline throughout Lent, often including much self-denial, but if it is truly a response to the Holy Spirit, rather than motivated by self-righteousness and pride, this self denial will bear much fruit – a deepening of relationship with God. But the Holy Spirit will move other people in very different ways, so first we must *listen*, be aware of the movement of the Spirit in us, and then respond in *our* way – not someone else's way.

So I am trying to encourage you that no one needs to 'be afraid of prayer' ...prayer is our way of acknowledging and deepening our own individual relationship with God. Lent encourages us in a very special way to investigate that ...to *stop*, to *listen to* how God is already part of our lives, and to respond. To respond to the God who constantly and tirelessly holds out his hands to us, longing for us to be open to the deep, deep love he has for each and every one of us.

Amen.