

Sermon “Lent, light and darkness”

Anniversary

This weekend marks the beginning of the third year since the Russian army invaded Ukraine, massively amplifying a conflict that had been going on between these two countries for many years. In the early hours of the 24th February 2022 the media, through TV, radio and internet, brought us news of powerful explosions, raging battles and veiled threats of nuclear war, should NATO rush to Ukraine’s aid.

A startled, confused, and fearful world struggled to take all of this in and respond accordingly. We are still trying. But I do remember well the words of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that Russia and the war would "not destroy our faith, (and) our sincere belief in...God".¹

Well, whether it is something on the international stage or something very personal and close to home, getting difficult news can shock, confuse, and frighten us; and no matter how strong our faith, we can still feel all of these emotions; we see this in today’s Gospel reading.

Getting bad news

We can only imagine the mood swing in Jesus’ group. In one breath he confirms that he is indeed the long-awaited, much anticipated Messiah. Everything would have then fallen into place; all the signs were there: people being healed, evil being overcome, inspirational teaching and miracles over nature – and now the confirmation that it was the Messiah that was responsible, and among them! Surely the next task was to get the Romans out. Their hopes for the future must have been as high as the heavens.

¹ <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/you.will.not.destroy.our.faith.sincere.belief.in.god.ukraine.zelensky.russia.putin/138267.htm>

But then Jesus brings them back down to earth with what the future was to be like. Suffering, rejection, and death; followed by a far too cryptic reference to rising again after three days. Shock, fear and confusion must have, quite reasonably taken a hold. And as usual, it was Peter who blurted out the natural, human response.

Jesus' response to him seems harsh, not just rebuking Peter but calling him Satan – a reference to Jesus most testing moment back in the wilderness. Clearly, Jesus had not forgotten those times in the wilderness – tough and challenging experiences often leave their marks on us and it doesn't take much sometimes, to take us right back to them. Peter's insistence of preventing Jesus doing what He knew had to be done was just too close to the temptation of Satan to divert Jesus away from His mission.

And what follows this was Jesus telling the rest of the group what would be required of *them* – and when he said they would have to take up *their* crosses, this was no metaphor, the sight of Roman crosses accompanied by agonising deaths, was all too common a spectacle. Dark times lay ahead.

Lent and life

Life can sometimes take us from moments of euphoria to moments of despair or from fantasy to reality. One moment the future looks steady and straightforward, perhaps even exciting, all is well. There may be hints at problems to come but they are too long into the future to worry about now.

And then all of sudden, everything changes. A piece of news arrives, or an announcement is made which changes life entirely. We find ourselves in a wilderness place, facing testing and unfamiliarity.

The season of Lent can remind us of what is *our* wilderness – the things from our lives which cause us to feel abandoned, confused and fearful. We often bury things away that we can't face up to

dealing with, it's much easier to pretend something doesn't exist and hope it doesn't materialise, rather than bring it out into the open to deal with it. But that strategy often doesn't work.

Many people I have come across who time and time again chose to close their ears to the bad news, or turn away from the problem staring them in the face, have found that eventually it has become too much and too big to avoid, sometimes with tragic results.

Jesus' telling his disciples of what was to come, warts and all, may seem risky but concealing it would have been worse. This way they had time to prepare themselves even if they yet couldn't quite comprehend it all.

And perhaps without the wilderness experience, and Satan's testing, Jesus would not have been able to so quickly shut Peter down, and would not have had the resolve to face the dark times of the cross.

Light and darkness

Facing the dark times is a theme for Lent this year. In her book 'Tarry Awhile', Selina Stone, a writer in Black spirituality, encourages us to see darkness, or Lenten wilderness, as not necessarily the times where we are abandoned by God, but as times when God is most at work, in creation and in our own lives.

It was in the darkness that God began the very work of creation. It is in the darkness where plant life grows; where our bodies rest and restore themselves; it is in the darkness where new life is formed. It was in the darkness of the morning, that the resurrected Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdelene. No wonder Satan tried to convince Peter that Jesus should not go into the 'dark times' because he knew that was where God's best work would be done.

So in what we might call the dark times of our lives, God has not abandoned us, but is present, working away, preparing us for

things to come, both in this earthly life and when it is our time to meet the resurrected Christ.

Trust

Our response then is to trust that God is present in these dark, wilderness places and times of our lives and to hold onto the hope which runs through the whole Bible and the story of our faith – that out of despair and apparent abandonment comes resurrection and abundant life.

This is certainly the view that is shared by many of the Ukrainians I meet in the English Language Classes I help at, here in Shirley during the week. For them, it is just a matter of time before they can return to Ukraine to rebuild their homeland in peace. When that day will come, no-one knows but they trust that one day it will happen.

This Church season of Lent lasts just a few weeks and culminates in the celebration of Easter and the resurrection, but that doesn't necessarily mean that our own Lenten wildernesses that exist in our lives will end. But do trust that God has *not* abandoned you and *is* working in you some good and fruitful purpose for your lives and for those around you. Because this is the message of Lent, of Easter, and of Christ himself. Amen

Rev. Richard Haynes 2nd Sunday of Lent 24 February 2024