

Lent 1A All Souls St Peters 2020.

Gen 2.15-17, 3.1-7

Rom 5.12-21

Mt 4.1-11

Last Tuesday night I was at the Cathedral for a service at which a plaque containing the words of the 2004 Synod apology to people who had suffered child sexual abuse was dedicated.

If we ever needed a reminder of sin and evil the events that led up to that 2004 synod apology are certainly a stark reminder. But actually, there are lots of reminders of the existence of evil.

Every day in the news we see and read about people who suffer at the hands of others. Both on a grand scale like war or poverty, but also the very individual way that humans hurt each other, are unjust and unfair to each other, bully each other, make each other suffer. Domestic violence is just a recent example. And it's not just acts of commission-the things we do. But also acts of omission-the good things we don't do which are part of the problem. So, we don't love. We don't share. We don't protect. We don't show compassion.

St Paul was correct when he said that all of us are sinners. All of us fall short of the glory of God. We all fall short of Gods standard. We rebel against God. We think we know better and try to run our own lives our own way and leave God out of the picture.

The first reading today from Genesis is a good reminder of the failure in all of us. We may not kill or abuse others but we all sin. We tend to measure ourselves against others so if we are not as bad as others, we feel that we are ok. But comparing ourselves with others is not the right comparison. If we measure ourselves against God, we are nowhere near the mark. And means we have a problem. That situation carries consequences.

I think we all know that by themselves oil and water don't mix. You can put oil and water in a bottle and shake them up together, but they quickly separate. Like salad dressing if you leave it too long. That's a bit like humans and God. God is without sin. Humans are sinners. The two cant mix.

You can however, make oil and water mix with some assistance. An emulsifier will enable oil and water to mix. They can't by themselves but with the addition of something else they can.

The situation of our sin has consequences. Our sin separates us from God just as surely as oil and water are separated. Separation from God means eternal death. The good news however, as today's second reading highlights, is that the obedience of Jesus to death on the cross is the factor that brings about the reconciliation of humans and God. It's not a great example but Jesus' obedience even to death on the cross is like the emulsifier which enables humanity and God to be together. There is no other way. God is perfect. We are not. Without the cross the two God and humanity cannot be together. With the cross, Jesus' act of obedience, his offering of himself, the rejection and shame he suffered and his life given there is life and peace between humanity and God.

We are at the beginning of Lent, six or so weeks leading up to the events of Easter - the great three days. Lent is important because it is an opportunity to reflect and prepare for Easter. One of the areas of reflection is how we are going living our lives. Lent is a good time to remember actually we are sinners and we really need Gods help. It's good to remember that because it's the truth. It's good to remember that truth because we are prone to forget it and work at justifying ourselves or excusing ourselves or minimising the situation we would be in without Jesus. Lent gives us an opportunity to realise again just how much we need Jesus and how lost we would be without him. I am not suggesting we wallow in guilt. That's not the point at all. But some reflection on our need for Jesus means that the celebration of Good Friday and Easter really means something to us.

I am sure we can all think of times when we have really wanted something. Really wanted. When we got whatever that was, we really appreciated it. It was something big for us.

And then on the other hand, times when we have received something that we didn't really want, we weren't hanging out for and it was all a bit so so. In a similar way, if we really are conscious about how important Easter is for our relationship with God, for us knowing God's presence with us, knowing forgiveness and knowing life in relationship with God, then Easter will be an even greater celebration when we get there. That's the benefit of some reality reflection during Lent.

The other aspect of Lent is the opportunity to strengthen ourselves to deal with the temptation to sin. That is to resist the temptation to sin. We can't make ourselves perfect but we can be strengthened to resist temptation.

In the gospel reading this morning we heard Matthew's account of the temptations Jesus faced. Jesus was in the wilderness a deserted place for a long period - the account says 40 days. Whatever the number it was a long time. Jesus was there before the start of his ministry to get straight what it was God was calling him to do.

Towards the end of that time Jesus faced temptations to misuse his power and to act in ways that were not the ways God wanted for him. Significantly each time Jesus was faced with a temptation he was able to quote scripture, if you like to rebut the temptation. And that gives us an important clue. Jesus knew his Bible well. He was a faithful Jew who had been schooled in the scriptures that we call the Old Testament. So when a temptation came to deviate from the way of God Jesus knew how to respond.

We can learn something from this. I suspect most of us would say we could benefit from a greater knowledge of the scriptures. Many Anglicans I have met say they really don't know their Bible very well at all. One of the reasons Anglicans stay away from Bible study groups in droves is because they are not confident in their knowledge of the Bible. Well, we can actually do something about that - our knowledge of the Bible that is. we can do that anytime, but Lent is a good focus time.

So for instance, we can spend Lent reading through one of the gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Or all of them, they are not very long. You don't even need a Bible, the text is online. Lynn and I have brought with us today some little booklets called Every Day with Jesus for New Christians. I know you are not new Christians, but these booklets look at the basics of the Christian faith and they are a great refresher even for very long time Christians. They have a short Bible passage for every day and some teaching on that text. These are great and we will leave them and they are yours to take.

Lent is a gift for us Christians. It's only six weeks long. We used to focus on giving things up for Lent - chocolate or alcohol or whatever and I am sure that was helpful, to our waistline if nothing else. But these days I am keen to suggest we do something extra not something less.

And that extra is first of all to reflect on the reality of our failure to measure up to Gods standards and give thanks for the fantastic and completely undeserved gift of Jesus' death and resurrection.

And second, follow Jesus example and spend some time brushing up on or further developing our knowledge of the Bible, especially the New Testament and especially the gospels.

I am sure that will enable us to resist temptation when it comes because it will. It will also strengthen our knowledge of God and boost our confidence as Christians.

If we do these couple of extra things, I think we will have a good Lent, a great Easter and we will be strengthened to keep being faithful as disciples of Jesus. Amen.