

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday and the morning radio programmes all included something on Lent, what were people giving up for Lent, what were people doing for Lent. I remember when I was growing up, even though we were not a Church family, Lent was still seen as a time for making resolutions, taking a fresh look at ourselves, putting something of a discipline upon ourselves. Perhaps the zips don't go up quite as easily as they used to so we take the opportunity of this time to go on a diet, take a bit more exercise. The early anti-smoking campaigns used to latch onto Ash Wednesday as a day to stop the fags.

More and more I have come to see Lent not so much as a time for giving up something rather as a time to review my life, the way I am living my life, the balance I have in my life.

In this increasing busy and hectic life we find ourselves very much activity focussed. Our lives are increasingly scheduled and we find ourselves rushing from one thing to another. Lent I find is a good time to build space into our lives. It is a time when I find myself paying more attention to my quiet times which can all too easily get squeezed out. So this Lent we are offering people an opportunity to explore the whole area of meditation – each Thursday night you are invited to set aside an hour, come to the Church. There will be a guided meditation that will lead into silence, a time of stillness, of letting go and just resting in the presence of God. Another feature of activity is that we can lose sight of those around us as we rush from one engagement to another. There is a lovely website, 40acts.org.uk. that invites us to do Lent generously. Once you sign up, on each day of Lent you are emailed with a simple

suggestion of something to do for another person, a spontaneous act of generosity that shifts the focus of all our doing away from ourselves and towards another.

Lent then can be a time of new beginnings, fresh starts. This links in with both our Old Testament Lesson this morning. In Genesis we read of a new start in the relationship between God and man after the Flood. In our Gospel reading, as we heard of the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus, we heard of events that marked the beginning, the start of Jesus' ministry.

At the minute in our cycle of readings we are a reading from Mark's Gospel. This is the shortest of the four Gospels. As you see today, Mark did not go into much detail. He just gives us the bare bones, what he sees as the essentials of the story. We don't find anything of the lovely scene around the manger, the birth and early childhood of Jesus. He launches straight into the call of John the Baptist. This morning, in the portion we read he hasn't told us anything about the details of the temptations – he just gives us what he sees as the important details. He uses a very expressive word as he describes the scene as Jesus comes up out of the Jordan after he has been baptised by John. He says he sees the 'heavens torn apart'. The only other time he uses that word is when he speaks of the veil of the Temple being torn from top to bottom as Jesus dies upon the cross.

The heavens torn apart, the curtain torn apart – I have an image of a breaking down, breaking through barriers. As the veil of the Temple is torn in two, the barrier between the worshippers and the Holy of Holies, the very presence of

God, is torn apart. As the heavens are torn apart, as the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus from the heavens, the barrier between heaven and earth is torn apart. Mark, in all the brevity of his language is giving us this picture of God breaking through into the world in the person of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry was one of reaching across, of breaking down many of the barriers that existed in the society of his day. He was not afraid to touch the leper, to talk with the woman at the well; he shared meals with tax collectors, with sinners, with those who would have been rejected by 'respectable people' of his day. In parable after parable he challenged his hearers, his followers to do the same, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to welcome back the prodigal, to be signs of God's kingdom breaking into the world.

In our own day, as followers, as disciples of Jesus we are called to be ones in whom, through whom God breaks into the world, into the lives of those about us; ones in whom, through whom barriers are broken down. In his own day Paul wrote:

²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *Galatians 3:28*

In these few words Paul was addressing all the major divisions of his day. This did not mean that people stopped being Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – we are all wonderfully different – rather differences become not barriers but places of encounter, of meeting in our common allegiance to Christ. As our society becomes more diverse we are called to reach across barriers of gender, of race, of creed to discover a common humanity.

In his own day, Jesus went out from his Baptism and Temptation to gather around him a band of disciples who would follow him through the course of his ministry, to his place of suffering and death and resurrection. At the start of Lent, may we reaffirm our own Baptism, our own discipleship, that we may be ones in whom and through whom God breaks into the world, into the lives of those about us; that in us and through us barriers might be broken down.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen