

Ash Wednesday 2020

The verses from the O.T which Tamara read, were from someone known as the third Isaiah, and were written to the residents of Jerusalem, after their return from 50 years of exile in Babylon.

Taken as a whole book, Isaiah had tried to address and explain to the Israelites, that it was all part of a divine plan of judgement and restoration. However, in the midst of a wonderful and joyful return, sadly God needed to issue judgement and instructed Isaiah to shout it out loud, as loud as a trumpet.

It was the same old story for them, as it is for us. They believed that they were doing all the right things, and things were only going wrong, because God had not been keeping faith with them. They were genuinely confused. Daily, they'd sought him out, eager to know his ways, as if they were a nation, who'd always done what was right and hadn't broken God's commandments, many many times. They thought by fasting, prostrating themselves and lying on sackcloth and ashes, they would find favour with God and were surprised to hear, that God certainly wasn't pleased.

So Isaiah had to point out to them, that they needed to change their behaviour. Just as all the prophets before him had had to do. During their history, the Israelites had frequently turned away from God and then cried out to him for help, which wasn't forthcoming before repentance. He told them to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share what they had with those in need, to help provide shelter for the homeless and to be reconciled with their families. To name but a few of his suggestions. What God wanted, wasn't one-off pious acts but for them to put right any injustices.

The fast, that God wanted from his people was a whole new way of life. Isaiah is pointing out to them that it wasn't the fast days that were important to everyday life but that fasting should be a new set of relationships, within their ongoing lives. The fasting that is really acceptable to God is one of fasting from bullying, blaming others, evil speech, evil thoughts, self satisfaction and blindness to the needs of others. In fact, what God wanted was a diligence for justice and generosity, day in and day out.

If the people chose to fast, in the way Isaiah describes, then they would receive the blessing they were looking for. Light, healing, help, protection, the satisfying of their needs and, most importantly, the presence and guidance of God among them. The Israelites, individually and as a nation couldn't have a full relationship with God, without a full relationship with one another. When their relationship with God and with one another was right, then God would be with his people. 'Here I am', would be his words.

That was about 2500 years ago but nothing changes, does it? In our gospel reading, Jesus makes it quite clear that we all sin. No-one present was prepared to stone the woman, caught in the act of adultery. They all realised that they were sinners. But the woman doesn't get away Scot free, Jesus says to her, 'I do not condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin'.

So what does all this say to us, on the first day of Lent. We're being urged to confess our sins but also to repent and, more importantly, to change the way we live our lives. For many of us, giving something up has been associated with the season of Lent. When I was a teenager, my Aunt used to stop buying sweets and biscuits and would put the money she saved into a collecting box, for the Church of England's children's homes.

That was certainly a useful thing to do but by the time Easter came we were back on the goodies. Big time. I often wonder if that was the best use of Lent. As the years have gone by, I've tried to use Lent, to be more positive, to change something in my life, which definitely needs changing. Something that I do, or don't do. More often, it's been to be more careful in what I say and, more importantly what I think. To perhaps contact people, whom I should have reached out to, a long time ago, but this passing of time has made it more and more difficult to accomplish. All this has made me more aware, of just where, I fall short of being the person God wants me to be. After all, that's one of my prayers every morning but I've realised that God needs my cooperation in this.

To be the person God wants me to be, requires talking with, and listening to Him more carefully. To study his word more often and more thoroughly. And that's easier said than done, I know. I've made my decision for this year and I pray I'll be able to stick to it. Although, I won't be any slimmer, I might be more use to God.

I don't know if any of you, like me, look at the end of a novel to make sure it ends happily. For me, Lent is like that. Unlike Jesus disciples, who had so many ups and downs in those weeks, finishing with the horror of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion, we do know how it all ends and for that I give thanks.

So however we prepare to journey through Lent, we have that bubble of joy inside us, just waiting to explode on Easter Day. And we're doing it together.
Amen.