

First Sunday of Lent
Mark 1.9-15 & 1 Peter 3.18-22
Sunday 21st February 2021
10.30am Cathedral Eucharist Bradford Cathedral

Heavenly Father. I pray that my words would be your words. My lips would proclaim your good news. And your Holy Spirit would open our hearts to your love. Amen.

I have a confession for you today. I don't like Lent. Shocking, I know, but there you have it. I struggle with not having flowers in church and not being able to say the A word, ('Alleluia'), and everything that goes along with the penitential season.

After the long winter months, I find hope, and joy, in the irresistible march of the spring flowers parading their colours: first the white lanterns of the snow drops and the hellebores, then to the bright crocuses, primulas and, of course, the intoxicating scented hyacinths, the trumpet blast of the yellow daffodils, and the grandeur of the tulips, all under the umbrella showers of the blossom trees. With each one comes a renewed sense of hope, as they transition our lives from the mushy browns and dull greens of winter, to a radiant new world. And I love it.

It's as if each day, God has left a sprinkling brightly coloured post-it stickers in the shape of these wonderful flowers, as reminders of His presence and His love.

Somehow sombre Lent has always felt at odds with God's delightful creation, but this year it feels different.

It feels like we have been living in Lent ever since the first day of the first lockdown – nearly a year ago.

The enforced separation, disconnectedness, of our daily living, has meant, including myself, people have felt bereft, because we miss what we enjoyed before the pandemic.

The pandemic has created, for many, a desert experience, as we all had to live a more isolated life. And when you are in the desert every emotion is felt more acutely.

Nearly all of us are mourning the loss of what was before: the freedom to hug, hold hands, to sing, to pop by and say hello.

Being together gives us all a quality to our lives that loneliness cannot. And this is born out by the latest news items about the detrimental effects isolation is having on babies, toddlers, and young children. We are created to be with each other

And only yesterday the Government announced that it was a matter of priority that opportunities should be created for people to start socially mixing again, in order for our mental health to improve, once lockdown eases.

Most of us are craving an end to the lockdown, an end to the desert experience. We long for freedom to be reunited with friends and family, the warmth of the sun, and the end of winter.

And in the midst of this longing, we find ourselves at the beginning of Lent, and with the familiar passage of Jesus' baptism and temptation in the desert. I find myself wondering: is it possible, the whole time Jesus was on the earth living amongst us, that for him the separation from His father in heaven, was felt with the same sense of loss that we are feeling during this pandemic?

That, for the whole of his 33 years here, his 33 years in order to bring us back into a right relationship with God. That separation from the most perfect father in all creation, and if that is true, then he surely understands better than we can ever imagine the pain of separation that the loss of a loved one brings us all.

And when I ponder the extraordinary sacrifice that Jesus made, not just his death on the cross, but the very act of being here on earth, I wonder: how did he find it possible to love us so perfectly from His place of separation?; because separation causes pain and sadness.

The words of His Father, spoken at His baptism: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased", are words we all long to hear spoken over us, but for Jesus, He knew the enormity of what was being spoken: a re-affirmation of the love that shaped and defined their very natures.

The Love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit has encompassed the whole of time and the whole of the cosmos, intimate and total, no beginning, no end - perfect love.

We are told that the time Jesus was in the desert he was tempted, by the earthly trappings of wealth and power, but surely this paled in comparison to the wondrous love of the Godhead.

But maybe Jesus' time in the desert also gave him space to lament; to lament his separation from His Father; to lament the pain of constant rejection that he would experience from all of us. We have never been grateful recipients of God's love.

And as he tried to share his father's love with us, maybe he had to lament the hardness of heart of religious leaders; to lament the ultimate price of the cross, all of which he knew lay before him.

Somehow being rooted in the Father's love, would have to withstand all that pain and hurt, in order that Jesus would not be overwhelmed, and allow the hurt he would experience to define his ministry.

Jesus could do this, because he knew that his end was in his beginning.

At the end of it all, beyond the rejection, the hurt and the pain, beyond his death was resurrection – a new life once again reunited with the Father in heaven – surrounded by the

joy of heaven, only this time he would be bringing new brothers and sisters to share in the party, to experience the same love that he had always known.

He knew that, at the end of the journey, would be something worth the journey.

And as he emerged from the desert to begin His ministry, he showed us a new way of living, of speaking and praying, that would not allow lament and sadness to define his actions, but love.

We live in a time of constant change, multiple disorientations, or as David Ford refers to it, in his book *The Shape of Living*, 'a world of multiple overwhelmings'. We live in constant danger of being overwhelmed, and those feelings of disorientation and lament tend to shape our living and our language.

Perhaps Jesus' time in the desert offers us a way forward, that recognizes that lament has a place in our Christian journey. And that, in that place of isolation and desolation, we are not alone, and this is not our final resting place.

Jesus journeys to the desert to find us, with the express intention of leading us out. Christ offers himself as our travelling companion, and if we allow him, he will also be our guide, leading us out of the desert to the place of resurrection: life beyond death, joy beyond tears, spring after winter.

The word Lent comes from the Old English word for spring and Rowan Williams offers this reflection on Lent for us:

"Lent is spring time, it's about preparing for that great climax of spring, which is Easter, new life springing out of death, and as we prepare ourselves for Easter, during these days through prayer, and self-denial, what motivates us and fills the horizon is not self-denial, but trying to sweep and clean the room of our own minds and hearts, so the new life may really have room to come in and take over and transform us at Easter".

We are in a prolonged season of Lent, but just as the flowers continue to bloom, so the love of God is always before us.

For me personally, I will continue to look for God's post-it stickers of love in the flowers of spring and follow them to the cross, and beyond, because I trust the one who created them, to keep me safe on this journey. Amen.