

*Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the barren heights, and fountains in the middle of the valleys. I will turn the desert into a pool of water, and the dry land into flowing springs.”*  
(Isa. 41)

That’s the promise of God at the beginning of Lent, the springtime for the soul, for each of us, for our church, for the people of Ukraine and for the whole world.

St Andrew’s Ash Wednesday 2022

I love the definition of Lent as ‘springtime for the soul’, because it focuses on the meaning of the word ‘Lent’ as ‘a time of growth.’ But does the word ‘Lent’ conjure up for you any of the same feelings that are associated with ‘spring’? Surely Lent is all about giving up and going without, whereas spring is about the end of winter and signs of new life.

I was fortunate enough to spend a whole month based in Jerusalem over 30 years ago. Many of the images from that trip have remained very vivid, not least something from the very first day. We were taken in a minibus to the top of the Mount of Olives, from where we had a spectacular view of the city, with the golden Dome of the Rock standing proudly in the centre. We were then told to turn round 180°. The view was totally different. The landscape was rocky and dry, with not a person or a sign of civilisation in sight. The city and the wilderness, so near and yet so far. Sadly, in the last thirty years large parts of that wilderness have been developed by the Israeli government as illegal Jewish settlements, so the contrast is no longer so stark.

But the city is still cheek by jowl with the desert.

Immediately after his baptism we are told that Jesus was ‘led by the Spirit in the wilderness’ for forty days. This was the springtime of his public ministry, what we might call a ‘retreat’ to consider the priorities of what was to follow. A time of prayer, reflection and temptation. The people among whom Jesus would exercise his ministry were not there, but they weren’t far away.

If we approach Lent as a time of prayer and reflection, to refresh our spiritual life, the familiar people and places of life will never

be far away. And if we make the necessary time and space, we'll be much more effective in serving and engaging with them when we meet up again. The idea of giving up or going without only makes sense if we gain something which helps us to grow closer to God and to one another. So some of the traditional practices of Lent can lead to a springtime for the soul. But only if we follow them through. What will our giving up and going without actually produce? Maybe it will help us to notice things we have been missing, or to attend to really important things we have not had time for, because we have been caught up with so many trivial things?

So often, when we think of Lent, we focus on ourselves as single human beings, and, yes, that can be important, and I'll return to it shortly.

But this year, Pope Francis has urged us all on this Ash Wednesday to focus on the world situation, and particularly the people of Ukraine. What do we see? We see a beautiful country, full of beautiful, proud citizens, whose cities are being systematically devastated, turned into wilderness, through the delusions and orders of a dictator. And we are left feeling helpless, watching this happen so far away yet so near. And then we hear stories amid the horrors of death and destruction, of individuals working to bring flickers of hope. A man, setting off in this car from N. Yorkshire today, to locate his family. People donating huge amounts of clothes, food, medicines, bedding for the flood of refugees. We see a President, calm and dignified, keeping in touch with his people, always grateful, yet always pleading with everyone to do more to help the Ukrainians remain defiant and hopeful. We see news reporters wiping tears from

their eyes as they present the news. Do we need any more motivation to prayer and action?

None of us knows whether by the end of this Lent there will have been a springtime in Ukraine. The country may be devastated, so many may or will have lost their lives, their homes and their livelihood, but we can pray and hope for an end to their winter and the signs of new life and hope, and perhaps do something practical to help that happen.

This Lent looks like bringing many sombre reminders of our humanity. *"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* And reminders not just of the sinfulness of humanity in general, but also to each of us, reminders of our own sinful nature: *"Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ."* And there we have the link to this evening's Gospel, this evening's good news: *"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone."* Jesus got right through to his audience, who had been so ready to judge and condemn the adulterous woman. Like you and me, judgment came so easily. But there is a better way, the way of understanding and forgiveness.

This Lent, the events in our world seem to be calling us to prayer for countless people. We pray for them not because God does not feel their pain and despair, or needs to be persuaded that we care enough. We pray because our world needs to feel the huge weight of love and grief and healing which is our only hope of new life, of springtime. So as we pray today, and throughout this Lent, let us always begin and end in gratitude and joy.

Remember: the city and the desert are so close to each other. And one of the Bible's most hopeful refrains is this: *"I, the God of*