

Sermon, St Andrew's
Lent 3: 1 Corinthians 1.18-25, John 2.13-22

*May we journey together in spirit, however physically separate, through the desert of Lent, and the different desert of Covid, in the light and strength of our loving Lord, one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, **Amen.***

Where is there comfort? What is our hope? How are we doing?
Where are we going? And how can our readings help?

There's a story of a sadly drunken gentleman being enthusiastically baptised by total immersion, by a well-meaning but misguided minister: on each dunking, he asks, with increasing fervour, "have you found Jesus?". Eventually, after the third submersion, the poor fellow bemusedly responds "are you sure this was where he fell in?". Many of us may be finding our spiritual journey bumpy after multiple lockdowns - I've noticed some paranoid tendencies as friends' mental health suffers: so any question about how we find the Saviour, through this winding walk, may similarly feel like trying to look for someone underwater during repeated dunkings!

Here we are in "lockdown Lent" again - how may we do this *well*, when our customary voluntary privations can be overshadowed by the compulsory national sacrifices of companionship, and so much else? How can we sustain ourselves on our journey, as the Promised Land of vaccination inches towards each of us at different rates, and sometimes my dog and I seem to be the only warm, living things moving outside in this cold, silent spring? (I find myself rereading Swinburne's "Winter in Northumberland", for a depiction of this sodden sojourn, as the roaring of the

Ouseburn thunders its way towards the open sea via the Tyne. Seeking highly emotional or intellectual poetry is always a danger sign for me! What are yours?)

Our Epistle can be very helpful about not necessarily finding consolation in our faith in the way in which we expect. It is far too easy, after 2000 years, to get very comfortable with the Cross, and to forget that we follow the “cult” of a convicted criminal whose execution had to be outside the city, because even his death could contaminate his community. It is dangerously easy to lose sight of the call to be a Christian country, to follow in the footsteps of that radical humility and self-sacrifice: just as revolutionary now as then. This Epistle reminds us that, if we seek conventional righteousness, the Cross can be a stumbling block; and, if we seek conventional wisdom, the Cross can look like foolishness.

When I walk in procession behind the Cross, I try to focus on its base, where Christ’s feet were nailed for me, and to remind myself that I’m only enabled to walk in that privileged position by His grace reaching out to me, and calling me to follow Him. I’m always moved by Mr Standfast’s death in *Pilgrim’s Progress* (I suggested it for my best man’s funeral), when he says “I go to see the Head that was crowned with thorns, and the Face that was spit upon for me”.

The Cross reminds us that this is how God chooses to be: to be with us, alongside us and ahead of us, through the deep waters of death and out the other side - hence the sign of Jonah (buried inside the whale three days) and the ancient symbolism of crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan. Galsworthy’s final, beautiful Forsythe novel is called *Crossing the river*. Many of us may feel claustrophobic under current restrictions, and Lent recalls us to

going down into the deep waters - I remember my training at South Tyneside for North Sea helicopter escape (I wasn't very good at it!), and the feelings as the waters closed over my head... Our Lenten journey is meant to starkly strengthen us by focussing on this hard route, Christ's company in which we walk it, and His light beyond the darkness. As Wesley writes for Easter:

"The cross He bore is life and health, Tho' shame and death to Him, His people's hope, His people's wealth, Their everlasting theme".

Our Gospel is literally turning the Temple upside down, and telling people that the purpose and practice of organised religion are not what they think, and should not shallowly stop at outward observance, but are matters of the heart - a faith, a religion, of the heart. So our prayer life, our conversations with God, are especially critical. The Lord simply says "here I am - talk to Me! Don't clutter my courts with currency or cattle"... As one hymn of journeying prays, "O speak, and make me listen, Thou guardian of my soul".

Prayer and the Cross, shunning the outward forms of conventional religion, wisdom or righteousness - not necessarily comfortable readings this morning, offering cheap or easy hope. I recently reread a favourite poet, chaplain Malcolm Guite, only to find him quoting another favourite, Chesterton, reflecting on our dark times under the Vikings in King Alfred's day, when a poetic vision of Mary brings no easy comfort:

"I tell you naught for your comfort, Yea, naught for your desire, Save that the sky grows darker yet, And the sea rises higher".

We may still be some way from "the high tide, and the turn", in our individual or national spiritual journeys. But if we shun surfeits of

spiritual sugar (though we do need some!), and are careful of our psychological diet, then we can walk safely through all suffering, inwardly guarded and guided - "heart of my own heart, whatever befall: still be Thou my vision, o Ruler of all".

May we journey on in God's hope and strength and may, as Sir Thomas More said when comforting his wife before his death, we "meet merrily" on the other side.

"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes

Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee

In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me".

in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.

Dear! of all happy in the hour, most blest
He who has found our hid security,
Assured in the dark tides of the world that rest,
And heard our word, 'Who is so safe as we?'
We have found safety with all things undying,
The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth,
The deep night, and birds singing, and clouds flying,
And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth.
We have built a house that is not for Time's throwing.
We have gained a peace unshaken by pain for ever.
War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;
Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.

Rupert Brooke