

our lives and consciously remove them from our lives ~ change our situations so that God can draw us towards wholeness.

Sometimes we can do that with little or no stress or effort but often it is a lifetimes work to develop the discipline to ensure that we avoid or refrain from the things that cause us harm and dishonour God..

When we get it right we are able to do as Paul says and not put stumbling blocks in anyone else's path, no-one will be able to discredit what we do in ministry because they observe that we don't practice what we preach! Instead they will marvel and enquire why

"... as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

What are your endurances, your hardships and distress, your beatings and imprisonments? How do you seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God? How do you receive all that God has for you and use those blessings? How do you respond to ridicule, criticism, rejection? How do you show the world that although in worldly terms you have nothing, in Godly terms you have everything? Those are the questions for Lent ~ and who knows ~ the answers may help each of us to dethrone mammon and make money serve grace! The time to start is now ~ as Paul says

"As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."

Amen.

Ash Wednesday 1st March 2017

Stop to think for a moment ~ what does our scripture tell us about being faithful ~ how to live and what our responsibilities are?

Too Much you might think ~ but God prepares us in each part of our pilgrimage when we are ready to hear and respond and He does so in bite size instalments for us to chew over and digest.

So what, in particular does God want us to hear and respond to through Lent and how, traditionally, do we express what we are learning?

God says to His children, to you and me

"In the time of my favour I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you."

Isaiah 49:8

God makes preparation for each one of us and He does so through His Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

If that were not enough He never leaves us on our own ~ we are promised and we receive the power of the Holy Spirit in whatever form brings glory to God.

Because we are God's children we are told

"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us."

It is no wonder then that Paul writes

"We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

Did you have pancakes yesterday?

Why did you have them ~ because the world told you it was Pancake Day?

Because any excuse to make a pancake is a good one?

OR did you have pancakes to help you to stop and recognise God's provision for you and to symbolise that you trust God for His provision ~ even when the ingredients in your store cupboard are all used up and you are not sure what the next meal will be?

Maybe for some reason you didn't bother to go through all the fuss of making them ~ that is almost worse!

Let's be clear yesterday was not Pancake Day it was Shrove Tuesday ~ the world has corrupted a celebration of the church to try to dilute what we understand and believe and it probably worked for many of us ~ no thought of

the faith reason for the feast ~ just the enjoyment of the food!

Shrove Tuesday ~ the day we prepare to be shriven. The day when we prepare to make our confession, maybe be given a penance (an activity that will bring us back into the presence of God) and will be absolved ~ to know that we are forgiven! Shrove Tuesday is placed deliberately before Ash Wednesday. Once we have been shriven then we are ready to fast and make a conscious effort to know more of God's Love for us and seek His Love in the world so that others can recognise it too.

Ash Wednesday occurs 46 days before Easter Sunday ~ 40 days if the 6 Sundays are rest days from the fasting! Ash Wednesday is symbolic of our intention to live as God wants us to, we take time to acknowledge how sinful we are ~ how easy it is to get it wrong and damage God's image in the world ~ by colluding with the world ~ opting for the easy way out and not seeking justice, showing mercy or walking humbly with our God! And make no mistake, day by day it is easier to live in the world as part of the world and not as we are taught as God's children ~ to live in the world but not be of the world!

Today in our tradition of the church we do not seek out the priest individually to make our confession confidentially and to be given a task by them to enable our path to God to be cleared and hear from them that God forgives us ~ the closest we get to that regular preparation is at our main worship when we confess corporately. We interpret scripture recognising that each of us can approach God without a middleman or woman ~ which is right and proper BUT it puts the onus on each of us to ensure our journey with God is progressing without someone to challenge us and guide us in the right direction and that makes it easy to overlook, to ignore, or to leave for another time. ~ Sadly for some, to never get round to checking that we know God is with us at all ~ just assuming He is!

Did you know that the ash we will use in a minute comes from burning the Palm crosses given out last year? Here, I do not invite you to return your Palm cross, collect them in and burn them for us ~ it is done for us by our church suppliers. It is not an easy task and it smells dreadful when it is done! Again we miss something of the ebb and flow of the church seasons ~ there is something important about giving back the palms ~ and realising how fickle we are in our relationship with God ~ happy to greet Him as He heads towards His death and resurrection but not so prepared to stand with him and acknowledge what He does for us in this great act of love.

Human nature tends to seek attention, tends not to go about things quietly but making sure that we are noticed! Fasting can be one of those things ~ that

we expect to be noticed for ~ but God says NO! Fasting is a private, an individual thing that you and God know that you are doing but no-one else needs to know ~ in fact if the rest of the Body of Christ and the world knows that the fast is happening it is not effective! Joel says

“Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love,”

What might that mean for you and I this Lent? Well, if you are giving something up to give something back to God ~ say chocolate and giving the money unspent to charity, that's fine if you get on with it quietly but not if by day 25 you are willing Lent to come to an end ~ telling anyone who will listen that it is hard and you have withdrawal symptoms from the missing sugar rush ~ and, coming to me to ask when Lent officially ends! Believe me it happens! If that happens then you are rending your garments ~ making sure others know how 'holy' you are being ~ how good for God ~ STOP right there ~ it is not you being good for God ~ doing Him a favour ~ it is Him being good to you and me that we are supposed to be learning yet again! No wonder Joel says let the priests weep and make supplication to God that the people need sparing ~ when they get it wrong again and the world scorns and mocks their feeble attempts!

God appreciates our attempts however feeble but not us giving the world cause to rubbish Him! It means for us at this Service that we are marked with the ash to remind us of God's love for us and how easily we take that love for granted ~ but once we have acknowledged that, we wipe the ash away to show we are ready to accept forgiveness and not be condemned and so that our preparations do not become a spectacle ~ a show for others to enjoy!

We are to quietly support each other in our attempts to come closer to God ~ we are not to judge or show prejudice ~ now that is something we could all benefit from abstaining from! Jesus dealt with the teachers of the law and their prejudice which was wrapped up in their interpretation of the laws God had given Moses. They tried to trick Jesus and brought to Him a woman they claimed had been caught in adultery. Adultery was punishable by death through stoning. They expected Jesus to agree with them and give permission for the woman to be killed ~ instead Jesus takes time to think and pray and then says if they have to kill her then the first stone is to be thrown by the one without sin. Of course they realise that they are all sinners so slink off trying not to lose face! The woman stands before Jesus (the sinless one) and He will not condemn her either but tells her to go and start over ~ to deliberately leave the life of sin that she has found herself in!

You and I have to do that ~ we have to acknowledge the things that damage