

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 21st February 2021
Lent 1

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

In a Zoom gathering last week the conversation came around to Ash Wednesday and preparations for Lent. We were discussing how we were going to begin the great season and how we were managing the season itself. One of our number uttered a thoughtful groan and suggested we didn't need Lent this year, we have already had it throughout 2020.

For twelve months now, through lockdowns, restrictions and tier systems we have been denied many of what we now identify as the pleasures of life – holidays, picnics, hugs and visits. We have abstained, been encouraged to hold back, to miss out on things. Even the prospect of going to work – either being allowed to go into the office, or even being able to maintain a job – has been removed. For some this extended 'Lent' has brought great hardship and uncertainty.

So why bother with Lent at all? Haven't we given up and gone through enough?

On one level this may be a true and honest question. Those of you who read the Church Times will have seen Dave Walkers cartoon this week in which one of the definitions of Lent he offers under 'keeping Lent under lockdown' has his characters say they are giving up nothing – these are difficult times.

The question seems to come from an understanding of the penitential season that is relatively negative. Many see penitence as just about hair shirts and abstinence. Giving up those things we love and along the way feeling grey and broken. In that light we have been through a very long Lent.

To see Lent purely as a time of abstinence is not to understand the concept of penance. Penance is what the faithful feel needs to be done on the journey of the faith to help them grow in and deepen their relationship with God. Penance is responding to God spiritually, finding ways to creatively engage in faith with the desire to deepen our relationship with God. Penance then becomes either the removal of a barrier to God or the addition of a useful tool

that helps us get closer to God. this is an important part of the journey of faith and a penitential season is a time given over to that task, specifically. The place of Lent is either to equip us or free us for that journey to God.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' ministry begins with action. We might even say penance. In his baptism humanity is given a pathway to salvation. A starting point for the journey of faith. Jesus is both man and God, human and divine. His baptism is a letting go of the past and the taking on of his future, his mission and ministry of teaching and proclamation. He is washed of those things that might be trying to hold him back from God and with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the proclamation of God, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." he is equipped and strengthened for the task ahead.

Jesus' next action is to retreat into the wilderness making time to pray and spiritually prepare himself for the task ahead. Often seen in the negative, especially through reference to Satanic temptation this a creative time in which Jesus not only comes closer to the Father but also continues that preparation that strengthens himself and clarifies for himself the task ahead.

Jesus' acts of penance, from our Gospel reading results in Jesus re-entering the community proclaiming the salvation of God. Calling the faithful to repentance calls them to join him in his journey of penance and faith.

Ok, where then does this leave us on this first Sunday in Lent?

We should re-understand for ourselves what penance means. As we enter the penitential season to re-address ourselves to our task of coming closer to God, of deepening our relationship with God. Either by removing barriers we identify on our journey or by gaining new tools and aids to help us come closer. This may be giving up something that draws us away from God, although we love it, or taking something on which may help us understand, ourselves, our faith or our God better. In either instance, done in faith, we will clarify our focus on God as our desire and hope and we will be drawn deeper into God as our salvation; then truly we can repent and believe for we will know the kingdom of God is at hand.