

St George's Anglican Church, Travancore



First Sunday in Lent

YEAR B

Sermon - The 1st Sunday of Lent, Sunday February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

I have always viewed Lent as a solemn time, a solemn season in the church's year, and therefore a season different in mood from the other seasons of the liturgical calendar. But at this time the difference is not obvious; I cannot think of a word that better describes the mood of most of the Church's year since 2021 than does that word 'solemn'. If we are going to gain benefit, spiritual and godly benefit, from our observance of Lent at this time, I think we need a focus different from that which has served us well in past years.

Let's just think for a few moments about what I said on Ash Wednesday in 2021. This is part of what I said:

In the past, I have said that there is no right or wrong way to do Lent. It is, like many things in life, very important to make sure that our observance of Lent fits in with our work, our families our other obligations to our communities. We need to adjust things so that we can meaningfully observe Lent in the circumstances we find ourselves in any given year. Little more than a year after I made these comments, we were to learn just how difficult, and how different a year could be from the years that have preceded it.

Since I first spoke in these terms, I have come to see that our observance of Lent needs to be adjusted according to circumstance, "... so that we can meaningfully observe Lent in the circumstances we find ourselves in any given year." These words reflect the feelings I described as I began to preach this morning. As I have contemplated just what we have experienced in recent years and what we are experiencing now, I have felt the force of what I said on Wednesday and It occurred to me that there was something to be found and to be developed from those thoughts about the need to "meaningfully observe Lent in the circumstances we find ourselves in any given year." As we begin our Lenten season this year, we do so very conscious of "just how difficult, and how different" this task continues to be from what we have grown up with.

I do not wish to suggest that we ignore the solemnity of Lent or that we do not reflect on the lessons the Scriptures we read in Lent have for us, but I have come to a view that perhaps we don't need to surround our Lenten observance with quite the level of solemnity we are used to. What might this look like? Well firstly I have decided continue some of the practices I instituted in the first year of Covid: moving away from the tradition of covering up, or removing from the church, our cross, our banners and our icons during Lent. In 2021, I felt this covering or removal may only serve to make our surroundings grim, without necessarily helping us to contemplate the true grace and beauty of the events we are working through and towards in Lent.

I have somewhat lessened the decorative elements of our church this year, and I have reverted to the practice of using a less bright chalice and patten during Lent, I think that these departures from our traditional solemnity may assist us in lifting the Lenten mood a little, and I don't think that God will be offended by them. We will still be celebrating the Eucharist in a simpler way during Lent as has always been the custom, and the absence of the singing of the

Gloria, and an altered acclamation at the end of the Psalm, will, I am sure, remind us of the need to be less extravagant in our worship at this time.

In that sermon to which I referred earlier, I suggested traditional ways of observing Lent:

“giving up something for Lent”, setting aside some extra time for prayer during Lent, reading more Scripture studying more spiritual writing, etc.

In suggesting a lessening of solemnity, I am not saying don't do any of these things and I certainly recommend reading and prayer, but I really do think, in fact I know, that God is content that we have, individually and communally, done a lot of giving up recent times, and is probably of the opinion that, over-zealously, giving some symbolic thing up, or excessively increasing our prayer and reading time, may not be the best way to go, for our mental well-being if nothing else, to observe Lent this year!

There will, of course, still a degree of heightened solemnity during Lent as we deny ourselves doing something we normally do, to remind ourselves of the discipline of the season of lent. Or, as we increase our spiritual reading, our Bible study or perhaps our times of meditation and reflection for the season, we may deepen our spiritual life and our relationship with God.

Let me change tack now with some comments on the Scripture we have heard this morning.

The Flood is the great Old Testament metaphor for the rebellion of the human race and its cleansing in the waters of the flood. It is also the statement of the nature of the covenant that God makes with humankind after the flood and which is sealed by the rainbow to be an everlasting covenant between us and God. What better start to Lent than an exploration of the depth of God's love for us and the promise of God's grace in our relationship with God in the fullness of Godself in that relationship?

Peter, in his letter, helps us along the way in this exploration by concentrating on God's salvation through Jesus and the metaphor of the water of Baptism. This metaphor is brought to a powerful conclusion in the last portion of our Gospel Reading in which Mark places Jesus at the centre of Salvation as, having been baptised and then *driven* into the wilderness for forty days, he came:

“to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

During this week, think on these readings and rejoice in the grace of God in covenant, in relationship, with us in Jesus Christ.

May we all resolve to observe a prayerful and gentle Lenten season this year!

Richard Murray, February 18, 2024