

An approximate script for a sermon preached at the Cathedral, on the first Sunday of Lent, 21/01/21, by The Revd Ruth Walker. Texts: Gen 9:8-17 Mark 1:9-15

Come and See.

We don't find the word Lent in the Bible, as such, but there are plenty of biblical principles in it. The 40 days of Lent (excluding Sundays) remind us of the 40 days Jesus spent preparing for his ministry in the desert, after his baptism.

Mark is pretty concise in his gospel and we don't always get much detail, but a carefully worded summing up of the situation! And his readers likely knew some of the details he missed out. We don't hear long descriptions of the temptations or the fasting of Jesus from Mark.

Jesus is Baptised, affirmed by God, goes into the desert, is tempted, angels are present; John the

Baptist is arrested, and Jesus begins his ministry...all in 6 verses.

And then, we hear the message from Jesus: what he has been preparing for. "Here it is. The time is NOW. The Kingdom of God is near. Re-think, repent. Turn to God. Believe in me...follow me...come and see what it's all about!"

This year, the Archbishop's Lent book is all based on looking at how our lives interact with God's big story in the Bible, and how we can be more open about it-allowing others to explore faith.

Being willing and ready to talk about Lent might just be an opening for an interesting conversation.

I'll give you an example of how easy it can be to co-operate with God, or to resist his prompting.

My first ever residential Retreat ...Lent 2016...I was travelling via Cheltenham and I just had time for two things which I hadn't managed to do before leaving home: a haircut and new boots. I was tired and as I sat in the hairdressers I had located, I was asked where I was going-probably because I had a case with me, covered in airline stickers. "Oh, just needing a few days of peace and quiet I said." Not a lie, but I was resisting God...I had an opportunity to plant seeds, have a conversation about faith and I avoided it...I judged the hairdresser..."he won't be interested".

On to the shoe shop. The same question came-obviously my suitcase invited these questions. But this time, I smiled and said "you might think it seems odd, but I'm going to a Monastery for a Retreat...5 days of silence, except for several times of prayer each day in the chapel. I admitted I

hadn't been before, wasn't quite sure what to expect...but I was looking for some direction from God. I must have shown some enthusiasm, because the young shop assistant didn't laugh or seem at all embarrassed. She said it sounded wonderful and could anyone go? And then she did an odd thing...but it's what happens in the Gospels! She called to her colleague at the till: "Come and talk to this lady...she's going to a Monastery!!" And they both sat and asked me questions...until I paid for the new boots and went for my train.

I have no idea what happened to the girls, but I know I felt very much better having opened up a "God conversation", instead of shutting one down, like I did at the hairdressers. I had to trust the Holy Spirit to do His work. I was reminded that day that people are far more open to faith talk than we might think. Not to being told what they must believe, but to honest conversations, where we admit we don't know all the answers. But we do

have “Something” to share of our own journey with God.

If talking about Lent might trigger someone thinking about God, is it worth doing some preparation...Taking some time to think “What is Lent all about?”

Lent comes from an old word for Spring...the lengthening of days...that should be something of a clue that there is new life to be found in this season...it isn't all a period of misery dreamed up by the church!

If we think Lent is just about punishing ourselves or having a short break from things we know aren't good for us...well that isn't very inviting. 'Sounds a bit hypocritical to me too.

Is it a religious way of losing a few pounds? That isn't the fasting God wants.

God wants our hearts to be changed and our motives examined and re-aligned with his will.

Not because he wants to punish us....because he wants to keep us close.

We aren't trying to sugar coat the hard parts of faith, but we do need to think about the implications of what we share. What impression are we giving of our God?

There is surely nothing wrong with explaining that the Church Calendar and the Lectionary Bible readings, act as prompts for a spiritual check up.

They are a timely reminder to do some honest soul searching about where we have drifted away from God...and think about the invitation of Jesus...to recall what Jesus willingly did for us.

Jesus loved being with people at celebrations/ meals/ talking together...he attended a famous wedding too...

But he also says when you fast, do it quietly...and not for human admiration. And when you pray, go to your room.

There is a time for sharing joyful worship together **and** a time for quiet reflection alone.

How might we describe what Lent means to us?
Because someone might ask us.

I like pictures...things that help me remember and understand concepts. I've picked out two images from the readings today which help me think about what this Good News is that Jesus said is **HERE...NOW!**

Images can act in a similar way to sacraments; they can be a tangible sign of an invisible reality.

First the image of the Rainbow in the sky, after the flood, in the Genesis reading. (And as I speak, I am very aware that floods are sadly very topical for some people today.)

The Rainbow is a sign of the covenant promise which God makes to Noah, but emphasises that it is for ALL people, forever, and for the creatures of the world too.

It is a one sided promise, in that it holds, no matter what we do...in spite of all the sin which led to the Flood, God is still committed to his creation, and promises never to destroy the earth again with another flood.

It can be interpreted as **God hanging up his Bow and Arrow...**a weapon never to be used again against the earth.

And the bow no longer points down towards Earth but has been turned **UPSIDE DOWN** in the sky.

God brings beauty out of chaos. He is a compassionate patient God, who offers new beginnings.

He promises not to return us to the watery chaos we read of before creation.

He turns things upside down...with values which are different to the ones we are accustomed to. You might think back to the Beatitudes.

God chooses to sacrifice divine freedom for our sakes, and we see that sacrifice completed in Christ's offering of himself on the cross.

Why would we ever not want to offer ourselves back to this God??

The second image is from the Gospel reading: Jesus willingly comes to John for Baptism.

But why? Because we know he is without sin. He does not need to repent.

One way of seeing his baptism, is that he gives us a **demonstration, a picture, of what he is going to do for us.**

As Jesus is plunged down into the murky waters of the River Jordan, it is as if he is identifying with the murky waters of all our rebellion, the sin in the world, our rejection of God.

Jesus is identifying with us.

But then, **he rises up** out of the murky water. And he is going to lift us up out of the murky depths of sin too.

And as Jesus rises, he hears a powerful reminder of the Love of God. "This is my beloved."

And then, he moves on to preparing for his mission to the world, through enduring the temptations put before him.

It's a picture of his dying, then overcoming death and rising to new life. A picture of his crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus comes up through the temptations ...and begins his work, declaring "the Time is now! God's Kingdom is here NOW.

The Kingdom of God is near, whenever **WE** let God reign in our life, in the way Jesus demonstrated.

Listen to Scripture and HEAR God telling YOU how much YOU are loved...

How YOU are lifted up with Jesus, out of the murky waters.

...and how God is TOTALLY committed to all of his creation.

And don't keep it to yourself!

When there's an opportunity, let your hairdresser know and the girls in the Shoe Shop!

Amen