

## Third Sunday in Lent

4<sup>th</sup> March 2018

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

*"Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin."*

George Herbert

The third Sunday of Lent is called Oculi, from the first word of the Introit.

In the early Church it was apparently called Scrutiny Sunday, because it was on this day that they began to examine the Catechumens, those under instruction in the faith who were to be admitted to Baptism on Easter night. The Elect would be invited to assemble in the Church in order that they might bear testimony to the good life and morals of the candidates.

Scrutiny [def]: critical observation or examination, from the Latin *scrutari* 'to search', originally to 'sort rubbish'.

Whilst there would be few who, in the stricter observance of Lent would be anticipating too much by way of an easy path, it does seem that in today's texts from Ephesians and Luke, we are made very much aware of the failings of humankind. I have thought long and hard about them, the texts and not the failings! They would not be my first choice of readings, but then perhaps that is the point: our commitment to Christian discipleship isn't about cherry-picking an easy path. Their content sits a little uncomfortably alongside my preferred understanding of a forgiving, loving God, and that too is arguably one of the challenges we must face ... a period when we experience a kind of night blindness, struggling to find our way to the dawn light where once again we can celebrate all that our faith allows us to believe. How easy it is to contemplate the Bethlehem star and how much more difficult the stark, night sky of the 40-day sojourn in the desert.

The particular letter from Paul to the Ephesians recorded in Chapter 5, was written at the time of his imprisonment in Rome, and although we believe that imprisonment to have been relatively unconfined and something more akin to house arrest, nonetheless a very frustrating restriction for a man with relatively little time to carry forward the establishment of a Christian fellowship, travelling some 10 000 miles as he did through present day Israel, Syria, Turkey and Greece.

Even today as we may walk the main streets of Ephesus, you cannot help but be struck by its cosmopolitan grandeur, a place of lavish ornamentation, theatrical in design, decorated and decadent. At that time, for those early followers, Christianity could so easily become muddled with the more familiar and traditional ritualistic worship of a largely pagan society, and where for many there was dependence on astrology, alchemy, necromancy and magic.

It is what it is and Paul does not seek to pretend otherwise, and whatever the teachings of the inclusive and non-judgemental love of God, the letter admonishes the reader to wake from sleep; to rise from the dead.

*Oculi mei: Look thou upon me, and have mercy on me, for I am desolate, afflicted and in misery.*

Paul is unabashed in addressing those things which continue to separate his reader from God; he reminds them how once they were in darkness, but now they live as children of the light. It is in the exposure to that light that everything becomes visible, and everything that is illuminated, becomes a light. 'Wake up sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.'

So too in the Gospel reading, we explore these same three themes of separation, darkness and light, and what we are able to see. At verse 14, it would seem Luke has deviated very abruptly from his earlier teaching in this same chapter where he had been speaking on prayer, including The Lord's Prayer as we have come to know it. Now he tells of Jesus casting out demons. Initially it seems something of a tangent from the opening verses, but in enabling the mute man to speak, he is also enabling audible prayer. The crowd questions his authority; is he under the spell of Beelzebul/Beelzebub? They demand a sign from heaven, something they can see which will make them believe. Jesus' reply is really very simple. Why would Beelzebul want to send his own demons from the man? It makes no sense and his audience would surely 'see' this. He then goes on to remind his accusers that those who are not with him, those who do not 'gather' with him, scatter ... scatter and fragment.

Again, it's very much about separation. Paul had looked at the separation caused by our actions; Luke speaks of the separation as a result of our doubt and disbelief.

And this, in essence is our reflection at the time of Lent; we strip back the gloss to look more closely at all that separates us from God.

*Oculi mei: Mine eyes are forever turned towards the Lord, for he shall pluck my feet out of the net.*

The journey from Lent to Easter is that of separation to atonement, and challenging though both texts might be to our relationship with God and to our faith, we may find they offer a solution. In Ephesians, the atonement with God, the place of being at one with God, is found within our journey towards the light; the clear and illuminated view we can enjoy by following the example of God. In Luke it is a twofold message: first, a reassurance that the spiritual warfare we shall face time and time again, is a necessary part of our ongoing journey to an ever closer walk with God. In casting out one demon, there is no guarantee there will not be another, and it is in the repetition of this struggle that we shall find the strength and depth of our faith. The second lesson is one of love. Jesus did not cast the demon out of the man because he was making any point about Satan, but rather because of his love and compassion for the man, a love that gathers us together and brings us out of separation.

In the preface to Archbishop Tutu's book 'In Gods Hands', we read this: "The Christian should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Tutu compels reflection on both, yet demands continually that we return to the scriptures for the way we see the world."

For myself, too often I think I am a fair-weather Christian and perhaps I would not pass the tests of Scrutiny Sunday. I think it's easy to lose one's faith within the confusion that surrounds our daily lives, the injustice, the cruelty, the conflict that seems never to be resolved. But is it here, is it in this darkness that we face the real test of Scrutiny Sunday, where we resolve to cast out demons by the finger of God? Having engaged with the world – in all its injustice and struggle- we find ourselves once again refreshed and refueled for a journey with God.

This is the path from darkness to light; this is the path from separation to atonement, and this the moment when we shall better understand that Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

*"Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
Guilty of dust and sin.*

*Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
‘Who made the eyes but I?’”*