

'That was the Lentiest Lent I ever Lented!' So went the little meme that raced around social media after our first lockdown Lent. Whilst I laughed out loud, it seemed a rather harsh judgment on the spirit of Lent! 2020 certainly felt like a time of deprivation and of giving up far too many things for my liking, but is that what Lent is all about? On the other hand, there was something in the stillness and quiet of the outside world that captured the essence of the season.

When we sit in silence, it is anything but quiet. Without the constant drone of the world's chatter, the ping of phones, the white noise of radio music, the endless ways in which we distract ourselves, suddenly, there is nothing but our own internal world; the quiet and not-so-quiet voices which we learn to drown with busyness, screen-scrolling, binge-watching, over-working and a thousand other distractions.

We relentlessly occupy our silence with things good and bad; anything to entertain our butterfly brains and fill the void. We occupy ourselves until we cannot hear ourselves think.

No wonder we struggle to distinguish God's voice from our own or our own from that of the serpent accuser.

Yes, sitting in silence is terrifying, not because it is so quiet but because it is so noisy. Here come the whispers of self-doubt, self-loathing or self-importance. Now the internal scrutiny begins; the attempt to sift through why I did or said or thought that way; the process of self-examination, which is necessary before we can truly know ourselves. Then there's the voice that says you can't, you won't, you wouldn't dare. The oughts and shoulds that bind us. Competing voices we can't dismiss because we need to know the truth of them. We need to attend to them; to listen and weigh and discern. How else will we learn the difference between the life-giving voice of God and the wriggling accusations of the one who would bring us down?

You'd think those voices would be very different; easy to tell apart but we learn from the Temptation of Jesus in the desert that Satan knows the scriptures and can wield them with devastating conviction. Alongside our Lord, we find ourselves encouraged to a kind of self-care (what is wrong with eating when you're hungry after all?) but the slippery words mask the real issue: It is only in the silence of the desert that we experience our utter hunger for God. It's only in the desert, that we fully understand that God has got us. In this still place, we begin to hear all these voices and learn to discern between them.

This season of Lent is not about giving things up, as though 40 days and 40 nights without chocolate will revolutionise our spiritual landscape. Lent is an invitation to slow down, to strip back, to pay attention, to be still and to listen.

So, my Lenten discipline this year is 40 days of knitting! Now I haven't knitted anything since I was taught how to knit a basic square as a kid but with the help of a Dorling Kindersley book, a trip to Hobbycraft and some clarification from those in St Michael's who knit (it's possible they'll see me and run before Lent is out) I am spending an hour each day in stillness. I may or may not end up with a wearable scarf, but it only took a few days of knitting in the face of God to

notice that my mind is too occupied, my diary too pressurised and it is God's voice that is most easily squeezed out.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting idleness or laziness is to be encouraged but a mindful focus on our inner landscape on our health, wellbeing and awareness is more likely to lead to a fruitful life than frantic tick lists and just one more hour at the computer.

With that in mind, I booked my annual retreat earlier in the year than usual but deliberately timed so that I could have a week of Lent in the silence of my internal desert (the retreat house itself was a more comfortable landscape). The desert reminds us that it's God who grows fruit in us and in our community. We do not. A conscious step into stillness even for a short time each day will, I promise you, change your spiritual life. It will teach you more about yourself than you may want to learn but, although it might just scare you a bit, it will change your relationship with Jesus for good.

At Jesus' baptism, God the father shouts from heaven for all to hear, 'This is my beloved and I'm pleased with him.' At our baptism, God shouts the same, 'Through Christ you are now my beloved child, and I am pleased with you.'

At Jesus' baptism, God the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and leads Jesus out into the desert. At our baptism, God the Holy Spirit comes to live in us and offers the same invitation; 'Let me lead you into the desert.'

At his baptism, Jesus follows the Spirit where she leads, out into the vast stillness. At our baptism, Jesus holds out a hand and invites us to follow him there.

The desert is the place where God's people are formed. It is where they find out who they are and who God is. Our Scriptures tell us so. So why not take an hour out of your day today to 'be still and know that I am God'? I'm starting to feel that 2022 is the Lentiest Lent that I ever Lented -and I'm loving every peaceful movement of it!

Gillaine