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A good Lent

Pancake Day always creeps up on me! By complete co-incidence, this year I actually have flour, milk and eggs in the house - in fact, I even have lemon juice and sugar **and** maple syrup - so that's my tea sorted!

More significantly, though, most years even if I do clock Shrove Tuesday, I forget about Lent. I think that's partly because, as I mentioned during Advent, I grew up in a non-conformist church that didn't seem to be hugely engaged with those periods in the church year.

Regardless of what Lent has looked like in the past, I wonder whether, as we head towards the anniversary of the UK's first COVID restrictions and lockdown, whether this year it might look very different for many of us. The thought of giving things up feels particularly challenging; there have been times for all of us over the last twelve months when it's felt like life has just required one sacrifice after another!

I don't want to second-guess what a 'good Lent' would look like for each of you. (To be honest, I don't even know what a good Lent might look like for me!) But why not drop us an email and let us know what you have planned, either just for yourself or with your church community?

As we embark together on this new season of church life, whilst continuing to negotiate together the wilderness of a global pandemic, may you know the sustaining presence of Jesus, God with us.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

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God's imprint on creation

Bible Readings

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as

servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

‘Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’

Reflection

Just last week I heard the most profound quote from Luther: ‘God has written the promise of resurrection not in books alone but in every leaf of springtime.’

What profoundly hope-filled words. As we slowly creep out of winter, every day we see signs of spring emerging in our villages and across the countryside, from daffodils on verges, early lambs in fields and birdsong emanating from trees and hedgerows.

God has left his imprint, his intention for all of creation to be reconnected and reunited with himself. Not only that, but he has redefined and reframed that intention in the context of all that Jesus came to achieve and release in that one act on the cross.

This is clearly outlined in Paul's letter in our reading from 1 Corinthians 5, but this action is not something that we receive passively, with no action required on our part. We need to pursue the things that God has for us every day, through the study of his Word, in order that we might receive fresh revelation and insight.

But we are called not just to be hearers of the word but the outworking and tangible presence of our Lord and Saviour here on earth in the communities to whom we are called to minister. For each of us that will look different, and the outworking of our call will lead to many different expressions of the love and healing we have received through the inworking of the Holy Spirit.

As our rural churches and communities, nations and the wider world continue to grapple with the impact of a pandemic that has now lasted over a year, God continues to call us to be his hands and feet in those places. We are the sent ones, compelled to be the practical outworking of all that we are destined in Christ to be. We need to keep ourselves in such close relationship and communication with our heavenly Father that his ways become our ways.

I have been profoundly struck in recent weeks of what it means to pray and keep praying, to seek and keep seeking and to knock and keep on knocking until we see the breakthroughs that are so needed; in our communities, our regions, our nations and across every geographical boundary and continent.

Our reading from Matthew reminds us that 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (6:21). Let's keep so close to our heavenly Father, especially as we begin our journey through Lent, that our heartbeat might be synced with his, that we see our rural communities as he sees them.

Prayer

Our Father, help us to see our communities as you see them.

Remind us that we are sustained by you and sent out in your power and authority.

As we prepare to journey through a second 'COVID Lent'

remind us of your faithfulness and presence with us in these challenging days.

Remind us that we can do all things through Christ who lives in us and through us.

Amen.

Response

How might you be the embodiment of God's hands and feet in your community this week?

It might be something as simple as writing a card to someone to remind them that you are praying for them. Why not ask if there are any specific needs they have for prayer and practical support at this time?

Revd Suzan Williams, Head of Rural Ministries for New Wine