

(Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11)

Whilst Storm Jorge rages on outside it seems that current events are assailing us from all sides. In this area we know about the misery that flooding brings, and sadly there are many other areas of this country currently experiencing that same misfortune. On an altogether bigger scale, the worldwide upsurge in cases of Coronavirus is threatening to cause widespread panic. And then there is the ever-increasing evidence of climate change which has already caused widespread alarm.

In a way, all this chimes with the theme of the gospel passage we have just heard. In the wilderness Jesus was assailed by temptations from all sides. But he held firm. In doing so, he offers us both a good example and an assurance that misery, panic or alarm are not part of the fulness of life which he won for us. Listen to these words from the post-Communion Collect for Ash Wednesday: ‘Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: give us grace that we may... daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life’.

You will notice that on the pillars here in church are arranged the Stations of the Cross. These beautiful illustrations by the nuns of Turvey Abbey tell the story not of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness but the steps of his final journey to the Cross. They will remain on view for the duration of Lent. Just before Holy Week, on Saturday the 4th of April, there will be a Quiet Morning in which we will study each illustration and enter in to the deep meaning of those blessed steps to the Cross. In the meantime, do please take the opportunity to use the illustrations as an aid to your own reflections and prayers.

But to return to Jesus’ wilderness experience, and his example of resisting temptation, I would like to share with you this thought of the monk, E K Talbot. ‘The one real victory of the Devil is not when he makes us fail. It is, having persuaded us to fail, [that] he [then] persuades us to despair, and we turn our backs on God. God has one unchanging desire: to liberate us from darkness into his glorious light’.

However we may understand the reality – or the concept – of the Devil, this idea will surely help us as we take time in Lent to reflect on our mortal nature – of which sinfulness is inevitably a part. And hard as this may be to accept, we must acknowledge that despair is contrary to the will of God, and in that sense is sinful.

But be assured also that no one is immune from the temptation to despair – members of the clergy included! In fact, our Diocese in recognising this to be the case runs a ‘Clergy Resilience Workshop’. And by the way, ‘resilience’ is a much-used word these days: applicable to areas vulnerable to flooding, to communities vulnerable to disease, as well as to individuals vulnerable to the stresses of modern life.

I mention the ‘Clergy Resilience Workshops’ because I attended one a couple of weeks ago, and it was truly liberating! For example, it turns out that we all have so-

called ‘mind traps’: thought distortions that basically turn a minor setback into a major disaster. One such trap is ‘all or nothing thinking’ whereby if what we do is somehow less than perfect we see ourselves (and believe others see us) as a total failure. We will all recognise in that particular trap the fast-track to joylessness – and in that respect we might say it is the work of the Devil.

So amidst the advance of Coronavirus, let us not fall in to the ‘mind trap’ that leads to panic, but rather keep in mind the fact that its spread has not reached pandemic proportions. No pandemic, no panic. At the same time, taking sensible precautions is wise – and we have to rely on people who have travelled from affected areas to self-isolate where appropriate. As with any virus, its spread can be minimised by good hygiene practice and government advice is clear in this respect.

The advice of the Church is clear, too. With regard to services of Holy Communion, hand hygiene is critical. So priests, servers, and chalice assistants should use a hand sanitizer; communicants should not intinct; and we should all use our discretion on whether or not to shake hands in sharing the Peace.

Returning to Clergy Resilience, and taking it a step further: you will be aware that I have been mentioning in the Pew Sheet (and in the Parish Magazine) a ‘Parish Weekend’ at the end of this month. The idea was for us as a church community to spend some time in fellowship and in reflection, and to begin the process of discerning in ourselves and each other our God-given gifts and skills.

When I booked the Methodist Church back in October, Lent seemed a good time to be doing all this. Since then, a lot has happened and I have become even busier than I was before. (In becoming Area Dean I am resisting the temptation to think that my appointment resulted from the Devil seeing a pair of idle hands... Instead, I rather like this paraphrase of Carl Jung’s famous quote: ‘Busyness is not of the Devil, it is the Devil!)

As a church community we have become busier, too. My sense in these early days of Lent is that for all of us the weeks ahead are full enough. The Parish Development Group have therefore taken the decision to postpone the Parish Weekend. So please ignore what it says in the Pew Sheet and in the Parish Magazine – and **don’t** save the date! You may prefer to save it for different reasons, though: there are two excellent concerts planned for that weekend...

And as I mentioned earlier, a Lenten reflection is still being offered in the form of the Quiet Morning on the 4th of April. There are also various social events in the pipeline, including a parish barbecue in June and a parish trip to Holy Island in July. Watch this space for further details!

As for the important work of discerning our gifts and skills, well, this will still happen – but in a different way. We will kick things off with a short course over a few sessions in the summer. Indeed, to give you a sneak preview of what I have written in my report for our forthcoming Annual Meeting, ‘A church community of

our size needs everyone to be playing their part, whether by doing or by being, whether in the public eye or behind the scenes. So releasing the God-given gifts of our most important resource – you! – will be a top priority in the year ahead.’

May you – and I – observe a holy Lent, a season of spiritual growth amidst the storms of life in which we learn not to succumb to temptation and thence to despair, panic or alarm. May we allow ourselves instead to receive the gifts of liberation and joyfulness, of fulness of life, which God in Christ graciously offers us. Remember, ‘God has one unchanging desire: to liberate us from darkness into his glorious light’.

Thanks be to God. Amen.