

Fourth Sunday in Lent 2021

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

During our recent visit to Melbourne, my son peered into our car. 'Oh' he said rather disparagingly; 'CDs, that's very retro!' Of course I still think of them as being rather cutting edge having been brought up with vinyl and cassettes. I still recall the first CD I bought, and indeed it was in the car that day when Thomas derided my technology. I remember that lonely CD on my bookshelf, I played it over and over again on my new player! It was a CD of music by Purcell which included four anthems; one of them: 'They that go down to the sea in ships' is a part of Psalm 107 which we read this morning. The psalm is about those who, for differing reasons have reached, in the words of the Psalmist, 'their wits' end!' When I was growing the Shipping Forecast was always part of news bulletins. At that time fishing in the North Sea was deemed to be the dangerous occupation in the UK. No doubt many of those fisherman were from time to time at their wits' end, and clearly it was an occupation that called for significant bravery.

In our readings today we are bumping up against folk who are at their wits' end, the Hebrews, the Ephesians and Nicodemus and I rather think that the Church in its wisdom realises this possibly is us, and offers us today as an opportunity pause and take stock. To pause in the midst of what is a journey in the wilderness and to breathe to be reminded that our destination is *through* the cross and beyond to the Resurrection. To re-orient ourselves and from there give thanks, Laetare, rejoice.

Unfortunately I often seem to encounter folk who are 'at their wits' end' and have turned to me in crisis. Their faith and hope in any kind of dawn has long dwindled, they are as Paul would say, dead; so where to from there, what does the Church offer? Unfortunately it seems to me that more often than not what is offered today is a rather superficial mixture of texts, mixed in with a few memes and some values statements, rounded off with a few bright ideas! And I'm not really too sure what use all that is. So what are we meant to do? Well this is what Lent is for, for us to begin to understand exactly what it is that we are seeking and what, in turn, we have to offer, what we are meant to do. It is not as many would think simply about fasting, flagellation and spending a few weeks sitting on top of a pole! It is about discovering our deepest needs and in turn those of others.

The desert experience of Jesus is our touchstone and guide throughout this season. He was perhaps 'at his wits end' and what he was offered in response to his need was obvious. They were what we would offer: something to eat, offer control of the situation, offer prayer that God would 'do something!' These are not wicked things but they are not at the heart of our vocation they are what we are being called to offer as we consider our needs and those of others in this season of discovery. I think that today's subtle shift helps us to reassert what it is that we are truly called to. The Hebrews wanted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt, the Ephesians wanted

to continue to enjoy their great wealth, hardly courageous! But the Lenten journey is one in which we pay attention to our own spiritual lives, our spiritual development, we are on something of a journey much like Nicodemus.

Let's consider something obvious, our décor and vesture here in church. If this place is simply to attract the largest number of folk in the hope that sermons and music and readings might just have some influence on some, then it really doesn't matter whether the church look like a Quakers meeting room or the Botanical Gardens. But if we are really entering into this journey, if we are engaging with the readings and studies, finding time for private prayer, attending a quiet day, using the calendar, then it does matter about our whether we have flowers or not or what the colour of the day is. The décor is a reminder of the sparseness of the desert, rose vestments a reminder of the new dawn which will break upon us on that Easter morn, should we be patient. It is the dawn of the Benedictus of Luke's gospel: 'In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

In Lent I, II and III we have stepped into the wilderness together, with Christ. Our readings have encouraged us to consider the covenant that is at the heart of relationship with God and hence with each other. We have seen how the patriarchs of the Old Testament understood this covenant, Noah, Abram and Moses. Each of them brought to their wits end, each of them challenged by those around them and their circumstances, but given the assurance of God's covenantal presence. Courage was demanded of each of these characters in our salvation history.

Today we are given a glimpse of our destination, the covenants of old are renewed in the cross and we are given perhaps some of the best known words in the New Testament upon which to base this moment in our journey: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' John is the evangelist of the people of the new Covenant. This is a covenant not with a chosen group but with the world, it is a covenant is sealed by the cross.

This changes everything. This is where our focus now falls. This is where our prayerful attention is directed. This changes the way we think and the way we think about each other. This is where we find ourselves when we are at our wits end. When we care for ourselves and each other it is not with superficiality, not with bright ideas, or with values statements but with the cross. The cross reveals our deepest fears but it is also the means by which they are confronted. We stare down the violence of the cross, it's a calling to spiritual courage, heroism; this is what we should be offering. This is what Jesus showed us in wilderness and this is what we are called to seek in our Lenten journey. Are we brave enough to patiently await the dawn?
Amen.