

LENT 3: 2025

Well, how's your Lent going? I hear all sorts! I hear about the house groups, and how occasionally, people go 'off piste' sometimes, and end up talking about Parish things instead... or amusingly, the brave person who said they are saving up for our Lenten charity, week by week, but 'it isn't going to be easy to twin a toilet with St Mary's CHURCH because we haven't got one'! I would just add hopefully, the word 'yet.'

Lots of people filled this church yesterday afternoon to enjoy the music certainly, but also to support our Building Appeal Fund – and I am very encouraged by local initiatives like that...the more the merrier – local people who value this treasure of a building, as they do also, St Mary's House.

Some of you, I know, have been reading the stunning book recommended by the Cathedral on the theme of forgiveness, by Dean Stephen Cherry. If I had to sum it up in a sentence (which isn't wise really) I would say this: 'Forgiveness doesn't come cheaply, but Repentance is the real treasure to seek and to be done – by the harmer to the harmed, costly as that will always be.'

Those of you reading our 'Living Hope' booklet, will have just read this related thought:

"I was in Nigeria recently, spending time with people who had endured trauma I could barely imagine, all because they are Christians. As I got to know them – got to hear about their stories and their faith – I learnt that our hope is in different things.

My hope is rooted in, and largely directed toward, what's happening now. While their (much more sturdy) hope largely flows from the promise of what's to come. Their hope is that one day God will make all things right, he'll make all things new. One day, there'll be no pain, no death, no tears." The writer goes on to say, "I don't dwell on that reality often enough – I don't let it fuel my hope, I don't let it pierce into the here and now. But I should."

I feel sure this a conflict within all of us and doesn't just belong to this season of Lent. It isn't so much a question of one person's hope being stronger or sturdier than another, but whether, together, God calls each of us to be a people of hope and a people willing to change and willing to repent. This comes across so powerfully in our Lenten prose; or again in today's prophecy of Isaiah:

"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Perhaps the African writer is right though, in saying that 'our hope is in different things'? If you are on the other end of war crimes in Gaza or Sudan (wherever in the world the weakest are violated or killed), you would just hope to stay alive, most of all, before the next series of night bombings. It seems impossible to put ourselves in that dark place, or in whichever particular tragedy, so far away. But it is still

possible to hope and to pray that the harmer, the oppressor, or dictator will actually stop this harming, and stop this hurting, and yes, repent. Isaiah got it: 'Let the wicked forsake their way.'

Which brings me to the hope of today's Gospel, the man who bought the fig tree and the wise and patient gardener who put him right. We have all been there. We feel disappointed or even frustrated that the plant or tree of our choosing seems to fail us and seems at first to bear no fruit or blossom. But the good advice is like God whispering to us, 'don't give in and don't stop hoping; never stop hoping, beyond hope.' As with all of God's creation, the tree, representing our lives, is good and has potential. With a little care, it can bear fruit. There is always time to make a change. God is generous and allows us time to try again. Our responsibility is to find the place and people that nurture us to allow us to grow in God's ways.

When we learn from our failures or disappointments we can not only act differently but we can travel more hopefully. Like the gardener, God does not give up on us, so we should not give up on God. In his own 'Stations of the Cross' (which I am thinking of using here this Friday), the poet Malcolm Guite says of the 11th Station (Jesus is nailed to the Cross):

"Here we see the length, the breadth, the height,
Where love and hatred meet and love stays true,
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns to light,
We see what love can bear and be and do." Amen.

