

## **Sunday 9 March – Lent 1**

### **Sermon by Christine Newmarch**

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

I wonder what you felt when you heard this morning's Gospel reading, the familiar story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Perhaps it reminded you of years gone by, times when keeping Lent was made too hard, when keeping chosen Lenten disciplines became unrealistic, impossible even, leaving a sense of disappointment.

As I was chatting with someone on Wednesday, not here, outside the deanery, they were keen to say that they are giving up biscuits for Lent this year, though they felt she ought really to give up coffee because it is so enjoyable. They were saddened by the thought this would all be too difficult, reminiscing about childhood memories of miserable Lenten sacrifices.

Hopefully, that's not your abiding memory of Lent, though maybe we have had something of that experience at some point.

However, the gift of Lent is not meant to harm us, depress us or bring us low, but to be a time of spiritual growth.

This year, Bishop Guli's Shrove Tuesday study day was led by the very Revd Dr Shelley-Ann of Trinidad and Tobago. She was delightfully upbeat. The essence of her talk was that we should be faithful, creative, courageous and open to the unexpected and the surprising. This way of living in and for Christ is attractive and encouraging to others – both those who are Christians or sympathetic to the Christian faith, but to believers of all faiths and none.

That is certainly a more encouraging way of turning back to Christ in Lent than beating ourselves up about the odd digestive!

Of course, it does need to be underpinned by prayer, sacrament and study, and in particular by building each other and strengthening our community of faith.

When Jesus was in the wilderness, he recognised the temptations which the devil placed before him as a distraction from his true vocation of worshipping and trusting his heavenly Father.

The temptations which he faced related to possessions, power and popularity. We see the impact of these temptations being accepted today, being played out in real time by those who use whatever power they have at their disposal for their own ends.

Jesus rejected temptations to prove his status or court popularity. For him worshipping the one he knew as Father was larger and richer than all these. It was his calling.

Jesus came into the world to save the world, for everyone. As St Paul puts it, 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on his name.

Or as St John puts it: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

As we move through Lent to Passiontide and Good Friday, we hear, we see, we feel something of that cost. It is almost unbearable to think about it, so for now, let us focus on the inclusivity of that message of salvation.

It is at the heart of today's reading from Deuteronomy too. It is easy to be distracted thinking about the land itself, the land which the Jewish people had been promised by God, and all the difficulties, the wars, the loss of life, the bitterness and political failures which continue so vividly today. This too is heartbreaking, as it overlooks the essential teaching on how God answered the needs of the people in the wilderness, providing milk and honey and fruitfulness for them.

Right now, the war in Gaza has destroyed the possibility of growing food as well as homes, businesses, hospitals and many lives. It is the antithesis of God's people bringing the first fruits of the season,

We have heard much recently about calls for thankfulness for aid, for military support, but such self-regarding need overlooks that all things come from God. John's gospel reminds us that 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' Of course, humankind has used the free will and the resources so freely given, both for

good and for ill. Without God's generous provision there would be nothing for which to give thanks.

Although it is not harvest season here, it is always harvest time for different crops somewhere in the world. And even here, it is a time of new life and new growth, with rhubarb, leeks and purple sprouting broccoli in season. So, it is always time for all people to give thanks to God for the abundance of the earth.

Deuteronomy calls God's people to acknowledge the source of the harvest by setting down the first fruits as an offering, and to celebrate together with the Levites – they were the descendants of Levi, a priestly tribe who ministered in the temple – and with the aliens who resided with them.

This seems a far cry from the situation we see in the Middle East today, but it also challenges how every nation deals with the outsiders in their midst, how we regard asylum seekers and refugees. It challenges how each of us thinks and behaves.

The temptations which Jesus faced in the wilderness were not so different from our own, not so different from those faced by society at large or by any of us individually.

If we (collectively or personally) are not thankful for God's goodness and bounty, we wound God's love for us.

Our Lent course 'A Christian Look at the Environment' beginning next week will help us to reframe how we respond to God's goodness, so do come along if you can.

In this season of penitence, the question is not 'Will God be angry if I do this or eat this or that?' but 'If I do this or that, but would it detract from his call to bear and reflect his image?'

So this Lent, take time to be kind to yourself as well as others, but above all, look for the imprint of God's love in creation and call on our lives, and pray, pray for the world in which we live, and for peace on earth. Amen.