

The First Sunday of Lent – 2011.

Yesterday morning I joined a full Cathedral at Portsmouth for the Rite of Election. It is a liturgy, at which Bishop Crispian presides, during which a large number of men and women from all over the diocese are welcomed and invited to celebrate Baptism or reception into the Church at the Easter Vigil.

The ceremony opened a significant stage in their lives. People from different stages and backgrounds have reached a common point on life's journey. Though all with differing experiences of life, culture and faith traditions the Holy Spirit has been working in their lives guiding them, often imperceptibly, to a deeper relationship with Jesus and with his body the Church. As they join us in the Lenten journey and as we look forward to their baptism or reception into the Church at Easter, we are grateful for the faith tradition which they experienced before finding us and we offer those traditions our respect and prayer.

At the Rite of Election they formally joined us on the journey towards Easter which we call Lent. Lent is a joyful season given us by the Church that each of us and all of us might enter more deeply into our relationship with Christ in God. That deepening experience is an opportunity for us to explore the ways in which we can improve our Christian discipleship which comes to us in Baptism and which is nourished and sustained in Confirmation and the continuing gift of the Eucharist. In a sense, Lent serves as a reminder that our Christian Initiation is an ongoing process of spiritual and human growth which comes to its completion and fulfilment when we die with Christ and rise with him to new life. Just as our life's journey comes to its completion when we enter the tomb with Christ and rise with him, so our Lenten journey ends when we do exactly the same in the celebration of the Easter Triduum at the end of which we renew our baptismal promises and recommit ourselves to our baptismal mission.

As Lent begins to get underway, how do we make the most of the opportunity given to us to be renewed in our faith, trust and love of God?

'Did God really say that you were not to eat from any of the trees in the Garden?' The starting point for Lent is to acknowledge the reality of the fundamental problem that we all have with God which is not good in itself. The story of Adam and Eve makes clear that the first man and woman were instructed by God not eat of the tree in the middle of the Garden. The serpent was quick to point out that to eat of that fruit would not end in death but that their eyes would be opened and they would be like Gods knowing good and evil'. They were easily tempted and they ate the forbidden fruit only to become like Gods in the wrong way. Immediately they felt the shame, not so much of physical nakedness but of a new desire to hide from God and live their lives, quite perversely, without the goodness and love that God wanted to lavish upon them. The story goes on to tell how the man and the woman hid themselves in the garden so that God had to search them out and say **'Where are you?'**

After those two had eaten the apple and felt that strange shame in their relationship with God, they lost that life giving and open trust that they had previously. Their story and our story became a sad series of complaints and resistances to God's goodness, full of examples of refusal to trust him and to test and manipulate his love. So the people of Israel complained against God in their 40 year journey through the wilderness, they complained against God because they were hungry and he gave them bread; they were thirsty and they tested his love and he gave them water from a rock.

Somehow the disobedience of the first man and woman gave us all an arrogance that makes us feel that we want to live without God's gift and find success and flourishing through our own efforts. So even today we see a humanity which has turned its back on God and hidden from him. So many people trying to win through violence and destruction; so many people wearing themselves out by working to achieve their own prosperity and style of life; so many people believing that God is not real and the only way to life is through possessions, power and pleasure. All of this is deception, all of it is exactly as the serpent said 'you will become like Gods', false Gods that have no power or value and only know about destruction and deceit.

So today we join Jesus as the Holy Spirit drives him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This is the logical consequence of his becoming human because here in the wilderness Jesus as God faces the shame, the testing and the refusal to trust that we all feel in our relationship with God. Yes he was hungry but notice how he refuses to turn the stones into bread because this would be about refusing to open himself to the gift which God his Father is offering. Yes, he could have thrown himself down from the Temple parapet, but his love was so great that he would not put God his Father to the test. And how could he worship Satan who is the very power of evil. It was impossible because God his Father is absolute goodness.

So Lent is the time when we are invited to face up to the shame, the fear, the sin which would hide us from God and stop us trusting him. In our relationships how often do we forget that our flourishing and that of the other can only come when we love without reserve and enter their struggle. In prayer how easily we forget that all we need do is allow the Spirit of Jesus to pray within us and to give ourselves time in silence and stillness so that his prayer can change us for the good. As we chase around being busy, successful and acquisitive, how easily we forget that it is only by losing our lives that we can save them. 'What gain, then, is it for a person to have won the whole world and to have lost or ruined his very self?' Yes, our very lives are at stake if we fail to realise that we do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.