

Lent 1, Matins
Jonah 3, Luke 18: 9-14
Mother Emma

The solemn season of Lent has begun.

Our Collects from the Book of Common Prayer and today's prescribed readings leave us in no doubt as to what is being asked of us during the weeks that lie ahead.

The Collect for Lent implores God:

Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.

This is the time when we are to take a long, hard look at ourselves, our commitment to Christ, our behaviour, our interaction with others, the tendency towards greed and self-orientation with which every human being wrestles.

Before our eyes this Lent, we see in the situation in Ukraine the horror and wickedness which is played out when that greed and self-orientation take over in the hands of the enormously powerful, who have been isolated from normal life.

We are rightly shocked to see such utter lack of compassion and of respect for God's children; we rightly long to help and we pray daily for those who are suffering so much as the result of human self-aggrandisement.

Yet during Lent, we are asked to remember that in every human heart lurks a kernel of self-orientation and pride, which can tempt us to feel we are better than others, even in some small way.

The story of the Pharisee and the publican – confusing for some in the modern age, who may not be aware that at the time the Authorised Version was written, "publican" was the term used for tax-collectors, rather than pub landlords! – addresses this very human temptation to feel or to demonstrate superiority at the expense of others.

On Wednesday, during our Ash Wednesday service with the school, we talked about the traditional Ash Wednesday reading in which Jesus urges people not to let others see when they are fasting or giving alms, but to do it in secret, seen only by God.

The story of the Pharisee and the publican is also about what I defined for the children as "not showing off".

We may be doing all the right things, giving money, praying regularly, obeying the commandments, but the moment we start to use these as a weapon to make others feel inferior, or even to allow ourselves to think negatively of others, our apparent holiness before God becomes nothing, and we risk being sucked into a situation in which our compassion is blunted.

In recent years we have seen people in positions of authority championing faith as a means of gaining power, disparaging others or of stirring up hostility between different faiths or denominations.

Yet the Scriptural teaching of Lent is quite the opposite.

Yes, we are called by Christ to follow him, to give and not to count the cost, to love God, and to love our neighbour, but these things should be done in all humility, in the knowledge that it is only through God's merciful grace that we are who we are and that our failings are forgiven.

On Wednesday, over 350 people came to this church alone, to be ashed, the traditional sign of Lenten penitence, and Fr Christopher and I also ashed a good number outside on the streets.

Perhaps it is in times such as these, when we see so starkly the terrible effects of blind preoccupation with the self, that people are reminded of the need for repentance and forgiveness.

In our first reading from Jonah, we heard of the people of Nineveh, widely regarded at the time as rich, powerful, arrogant and idolatrous.

God sends Jonah the prophet to tell them that he has seen their wickedness and will destroy them.

As everyone probably knows, Jonah doesn't much like the idea of this and runs away to sea, is thrown overboard and spends three days in the belly of a great fish; but by the passage we heard today, he has been rescued by God and sent off once again on his mission to warn the people of Nineveh of the wrath to come.

The king of Nineveh hears and believes Jonah, commanding his citizens to do the same, to fast and to repent.

As a result, God himself decides to forgive and not to punish the people of Nineveh and to spare them everything he had threatened.

In the next chapter, following the one we heard today, Jonah is very angry with God, and says that now God has not done what Jonah warned, the Ninevans will turn against him and think that he made it up.

Here, once again, the Scriptures offer us in the form of a good story, a deeply probing question about our own beliefs.

Firstly, are we prepared to speak out against evil, selfishness and greed, however difficult this may feel?

Do we take opportunities to remind people to put the needs of others before their own (and do we consistently do this ourselves?)

Do we speak warmly and openly of God's love, his mercy and forgiveness?

But secondly, when we see that those who have repented, even of sins or failings we may find hard to forgive, appear to have been forgiven, do we, like Jonah, find this annoying?

It is very hard to be honest with oneself – and much easier to compare oneself favourably with others like the proud Pharisee, but the Lenten calling to penitence requires us to stare directly at our own words and actions and ask ourselves why we are worthy of God's forgiveness.

Martina has been sending out a Lenten thought for the day to our children and families, and yesterday she reminded us of Jesus' instruction to remove the plank from one's own eye before trying to remove the speck of dust from our neighbour's.

It is when we have truly repented of our own selfishness, and know that we have received God's forgiveness and mercy during this season, that we shall be rightly equipped to speak out boldly against the true evil we see in the world around us, and to stand alongside those who with humility and courage seek to resist it and to build God's kingdom of justice and peace.