### Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 17th February 2021- Revd Dr Sean Cathie

It’s a strange thing but we mark the beginning of Lent with a reminder of ending, our ending, that ending that will come, though we know not when or how. Words that have been associated with Christian burial, “Dust thou art and unto dust shall you return” are used sometimes when the foreheads of the worshippers are marked with the sign of the cross in ashes.

Echoing our being marked with the sign of the cross at baptism, which also marks an ending and a beginning, we are invited into the movement of our Lord’s Passion, entering into a dying that leads to new life. Why this challenging language? Because, as St Paul memorably said: “For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do”. We human beings are riven with conflict between doing what is good and what is not. The conflict arises from our confusions about what is really good and what we really want.

What we need is *help* to find our way through these conflicts because so often what we *want* to do leads to trouble of some sort. As the proverb says: A fool and his money are soon parted! So we are faced with the same question that confronted our Lord: how shall we find the true path that leads to God and to freedom?

His search took him into the wilderness, where many of God’s messengers had gone to be with God. And in our Lord’s encounters with Satan, we see him being tested by having attractive options dangled before him. The stories as we have them are condensed accounts of the conflict he went through. Each time, the saying that expresses our Lord’s clarity of mind has only been achieved as a result of his weighing things up, testing them, is this the way? Is this alright? Do I have to go this way?

How does being in the desert help him in this? Indeed, how does engaging in acts of self-denial help us, in our quest to draw closer to him and follow God’s way? People who go through a crisis often report afterwards that they found out who their real friends were. Crises are both testing and clarifying, in the same way that facing an exam deadline is or our own death. People who know themselves to be dying often see very clearly that they have some “unfinished business.” Faced with *that* finality, many see clearly things they have left undone as well as things they have done that they should not have done. These moments of clarity contain both judgment and opportunity.

So it is with the season of Lent. If we open our hearts to the Lord, if we honestly desire to draw closer to him, we shall see our selves more clearly too. Sometimes we see so clearly it obscures our sense of God drawing nearer to us - feeling guilt or shame, we turn and run.

This is where choosing to take on something as an act of self-denial can be a source of strength, especially if that something includes worship, prayer or meditation. Holding on to this, doing it whether we feel like it or not, is both battle and help. And it is that struggle that matters -not the perfect fulfilling of the plan. For in the struggle, we see in close-up the real issues we have to face if we are to be free of the passions and compulsions which pull and blow us of course. That is what is so unwelcome about committing ourselves to ‘doing something for Lent,’ because we shall see ourselves as we really are . .

And strange to say, this is the opportunity. With this clarity about ourselves begins the stripping away of the illusions and confusions that hold us, and block us from seeing ourselves clearly, drawing nearer to God or indeed from seeing other people clearly. We discover that we cannot do this following of our Lord in our own power or willing. Strangely, we need to fail in this to discover that. This is part of the stripping away of the things we rely on. From these things we make our identity and that comes between us and those we love and also, what is real. They certainly come between us and God, not because God wishes to humiliate us but because we come to the deepest truths by being tested and stripped of those non-essentials that we hold on to so tightly.

This is why silence is such a feature in the search for closeness with God. Without the ususal activities to distract ourselves, who are we? What are we? We realise that we are our very own soap opera with passions and grievances, fears and anxieties whirling us about and obscuring our true selves. But when the silence is linked with acts of prayer and worship, we have an anchor to hold to and so the words of the psalms, for example, remind us of the struggles of others and of the faithfulness of God. Holding to the anchor of prayer, we no longer have to be whirled around. Helpfully, this gives us something to do, something that puts us into the hand of God. So it is that, in the doing of it, something begins to change, a new *way*, *new* attitudes, possibilities, begin to find us . . .