

WHY SHOULD YOUR CHURCH COMMIT TO A LIVING LENT?

Sunday 10th March
First Sunday in Lent.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10: 8-13
Luke 4:1-13

Lectionary themes:

The passages this week open up the question of 'what is salvation?' For the Israelites this is grounded: God gives them a land of milk and honey. For Paul it is about voicing our internal faith that God is willing to save anyone who calls on Him, Jew or Gentile. For Luke it is about what sort of messiah Jesus will be.

This gives the Living Lent preacher plenty of scope to open up the question of what salvation looks like and how this connects with our world. Here two of the passages have been picked out.

The obvious pick for eco-links: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

This text has obvious connections to living in an eco-friendly way and helps to open up the questions for us. Here the story of salvation is intrinsically connected to the Lord God giving the Israelite nation a land to tend and to thrive in after a time of oppression.

The first fruit of the ground is given to God as an offering. This is something we perhaps connect with harvest, or by putting our financial offering in to the plate on a Sunday (or by bank transfer!).

- How does seeing the planet or land we live on as given to us by God shape our relationship with it?
- How can our worship include tangible ways to remind us of this giftedness of our planet and its resources?

Around the world people continue to toil in affliction in order that we can live in a land of many resources. How do we bring this salvation to them?

The gospel in light of Living lent: Luke 4:1-13

In this story Jesus has just been baptised and he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. In verse 1, the emphasis is that this is the Spirit's work, Jesus 'full of the Spirit' is 'led by the Spirit' into the wilderness. Here there is both a sense of the Holy Spirit as an internal presence and an external guide. This may give scope for a Living Lent preacher to talk about the Holy Spirit being at work in the world, as well as being present inside us. Certainly the scripture is clear that whatever happens next, this is divinely intended: it is a moment of significant action.

The wilderness is a place both of demonic activity and divine encounter. The number 40 in connection to the wilderness references Israel's 40 year wandering in the wilderness. Similarly, 40 days was the length of Moses' fasts (e.g. Exodus 34:28) and Elijah's fast (e.g. 1 Kings 19:8) at key points in Israel's history. Here is the suggestion of precedent about fasting at a key point in history to focus on what God is doing. This sets the scene for eco-preachers as we think about our environment and our actions at this significant juncture in history.

Temptation 1: The temptations are written in different orders in the different gospels. Here we start with Jesus being hungry - he's been fasting for 40 days and the devil suggests he transforms a stone into bread. The 'if' in this passage contains the sense of 'since' rather than as a conditional clause. The implied question is what sort of messiah this is going to be. The implication is therefore that this test is about whether Jesus is willing to exploit his privilege of sonship and powers available to him. Jesus replies with the idea that doing God's will is more important than providing for oneself.

Temptation 2: Jesus is shown all of the world from above and told it can be his. Here the conditions of the deal are hidden later. The temptation is about seizing power outside of God's promise and provision. This is a very critical view of the power of kingdoms in the world, especially for Luke who takes a more sympathetic approach to the Roman Empire.

But here Luke has a more expanded account of Satan's relationship to power and this temptation than is in the Matthew. The structures of the world are shown to be corrupted. Of course, Jesus refuses, replying with echoes of Deuteronomy 6:13, to give honour to God and not idols.

Temptation 3: Jesus is tested to throw himself off a high point and trust that God will protect him. Jesus argues that we should not put the Lord our God to the test.

How do these three temptations relate to living in an eco-friendly way this lent?

As children of God, 'since' we are children of God, we get to participate in these temptations - and perhaps we too will follow this pattern: firstly, we will opt to journey to the wilderness places, discovering perhaps the parts of our world where there is now drought or the destruction of life because of climate change. By opting to fast from hurting the world we make a significant act to listen to God at this key moment in the world's history.

Secondly, having lived this personal hunger, we will discover the structural struggles. The conversations around climate change are broader, and are about big empires that have corrupted power. We too face the choice about whether to bow down and worship these, or whether to trust in God.

Lastly, we face the challenge of whether we are just going to jump to our own destruction on the issue of climate change and trust that God will save us. But, Jesus refuses to put God to the test. When it comes to climate change, we shouldn't test God's protection in this way.



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