

Sermon for 21st February 2010
Sustaining the Sacred Centre
Lent 1 (Romans 10:8b-13 and Luke 4:1-13)

Here are three things to say if you get caught sleeping at work:

1. They told me at the blood bank this might happen
2. I was meditating on the vision statement
3. ... in Jesus name, Amen.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, traditionally a time of fasting, prayer and self-examination in preparation to celebrate Christ's resurrection. As part of our Lenten discipline, we're starting a 5 week sermon series about our vision and purpose. The PCC has worked on the future direction for our church for more than a year and we have built on the diocesan strategy Living Faith and adapted it for our own context. We haven't yet had a chance to consider the vision in detail, so Lent is our opportunity. And you should have a bookmark like this to help you reflect on our vision over Lent.

Our vision is the transformation of all human life in Christ. A big task! Don't worry, we're not going to try to accomplish that in 3 years. But it's the direction we're heading in, and everything we are and do works towards that goal. The path we're taking to get there is Living Faith in Burghfield in five ways. And these are the things we'll be considering in our worship through Lent this year. Today, we're thinking about Sustaining the Sacred Centre, or in non-churchy language – how we stay close to God, deepen our enjoyment of God and recognise God's presence in everyday life.

To get us going, here's a quote from The Intercessions Handbook by the Bishop of Oxford: 'Let us pray for the Church and for the world, and let us thank God for a short sleep.' That at least is how it seems when on a Sunday morning someone begins to lead the intercessions. ... The eyes are closed – legitimately – and no one can see that we have nodded off, or our mind has wandered ... Suddenly the intercessions are over ... And one of the high points of the service has passed again." He goes on to describe prayer as 'an enormous privilege and responsibility', not 'a task for the faint-hearted'.

The Christian life is not a bed of roses, so finding ways of staying close to God in the struggle of daily life is important if we're to be faithful disciples of Christ. Jesus never promised the Christian life would be easy, we just have to look at today's gospel reading to know that. Jesus has just been baptised and heard God affirm him as God's beloved Son. What higher spiritual experience could there be? Yet immediately afterwards Jesus is tempted by thoughts of the miracles he could do to win people over; to show he's special because God's angels catch him when he leaps from the Temple; and to give in to the desire for power over others. He resists all these temptations, but Luke ends his account with these ominous words: 'when the devil had

finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.' The temptations were not over, they would return. If there are highs and lows, glories and temptations, in Jesus' spiritual experience, how can we expect anything else in our own experience of prayer and of God.

Many of us have experienced spiritual highs, but the more common experience is temptation, struggle and spiritual lows – doubts; or nagging questions 'God if you really care then why don't you stop suffering, why did you allow the earthquake in Haiti, or my friend to die?'; the feeling of emptiness or pointlessness when we pray. When this is so often our experience, how can we stay close to God?

There are no easy answers. Prayer is hard work most of the time – 'not a task for the faint-hearted' but something to grapple with as we continue our journey with God. Archbishop Michael Ramsay, when he was asked how long he spent in prayer each day, once said '5 minutes' but it takes me 55 minutes to get to that point.

But if there is an answer to staying close to God, I think it's through prayer, however that's expressed, because prayer is about building our relationship with God, rather than, as we more often treat it, a time to present God with a long wish list or tell God what he should be doing. And because prayer and our relationship with God are so central to who we are as Christians, we're going to spend this year focusing on these things, asking each other about our prayer life, encouraging each other to pray more often and more deeply, praying regularly for our community. This is not an exercise in feeling guilty that we don't pray enough, or we pray badly – there's no such thing as bad prayer, there is just our prayer, and God accepts that and draws us closer to himself through our prayer. But it is a chance for a fresh start with prayer and our relationship with God, and perhaps to renew our prayer life by trying a new way of praying.

Here's a prayer leaflet written by Bishop John to help you do that. It's not churchy or preachy, it's down to earth and practical and if you use it, it will help you draw closer to God. It will help you to pray as you can, not as you can't. You might even use one of the ideas here to try a new way of praying. If you're the sort of person who needs motivation, you might like to ask someone to pray with you regularly, or ask me to suggest someone you can pray with. You might be like me and find it much easier to pray while you're walking. If you haven't got one of our prayer diaries, take one today and use it to help you pray for our community, perhaps as you walk or drive around. Or you might find silent prayer right for you. The important thing is not how you pray, but that you pray and grow closer to God.

So I pray that you and I will have a holy Lent, perhaps trying a new way to pray so we might come closer to God and deepen our enjoyment of God, as we learn from him what it is to sustain our sacred centre.

Blessings,
Gill