

*Dear friends in Christ!*

This is the first Sunday of Lent, traditionally when our thoughts turn towards doing something that will lead us to change a little bit and maybe become a better person, know a little more about God, think more deeply about our faith and how best we might do something about it in the future. I want to encourage you in that, in whatever way is right for you. And I am going to do that against a background of the work carried out last year for Growing our Church, and in a realisation as part of that, that the Ministry Team doesn't really know enough about the people of our church. In particular we don't know enough about the gifts talents and abilities, that we all have.

Mine are different from yours, not better, but different. That is an inevitability because we are different people, we have come to this Christian community from different directions, different life experiences of just living in whatever circumstances that may be. We come with different experiences of our journey with God which have actually brought us here together at this time and in this place. If we are to grow as a church, but perhaps more specifically and importantly, as a person, we need to use this Lenten time for taking stock of ourselves, cherishing the gifts that

God, in his enormous love for us, has developed in us, and then seeking ways in which we can offer those gifts for the benefits of ourselves, this church, for God. We may not think we are very gifted, that we have nothing to offer, and certainly if we don't reflect upon them, don't value them, and then don't share them, whatever we have is wasted. God hates waste.

I know that I shall never understand God fully, never know all about Him completely. But I do know Him, in my own way, and I do understand Him in my own way. That too might well be different from the way that you do but that, ultimately, doesn't matter, what matters is that we have enough understanding to make the step of faith that is needed to give something of ourselves to Him. I have had the privilege of being ordained and one of the things that continually drives me on is to try and help people to know and understand something of God too. I don't need them to know God as I do, but I do want them to know God as He would want them to do. And that is where all of this links in with Lent.

Traditionally Lent is a time when we give something up, for Lent and for God. I don't want you to give up anything, but I do want you to do something, for you and for God. I want you to make an offering to God, offering being the true meaning of the word sacrifice.

And in order for you to do that I want you to spend some time reflecting upon your journey with God and those times when you have had some understanding of Him, however small or limited that may have been, however mind-blowing it may have been. I want you to spend some time there, in those beautiful times, when it has all been wonderfully clear for you, even if only briefly, because precious few of us are blessed with a perfect and lasting understanding, or even a sense of His permanent presence with us, though of course the fault there lies in us and not Him. Let us all close our eyes for a short time and listen to our inner being.

– silence -

And after you have spent that time in reflection I want you to ask yourself the question, in His presence and conscious of His will for you, what next? What is it that God wants you to do, for Him, for you, for your family or your friends, for the church or the people that you work with, for climate change or for world peace, whatever, I don't know – you will. And when you have found it I want you to do it. And that will be your offering to God this Lent and beyond, your sacrifice made at the foot of the cross. The important thing is to do it, because now is the time. Now is the time that

God is breaking into your heart and your life. Now is the time when God wants us to grow our church, right now here, together, in this place reaching out to this community.

We have to practice our love in our relationships with other people. We have to practice being mindful when we're relating with other people that we are God's beloved. We don't have to be right. We're already God's beloved. We don't have to have the power to make them into people that we like. We don't need any power other than love; and in that powerlessness there is great power. We don't need to find out identity by having others tell us who we are. We know and we trust who we are. We're God's beloved and we can practice this love by sharing it with them.

We can practice our to be loved in our relationships with all the world: every moment of our days to continually remember this miracle and practice it. Jesus had to do that in the desert to practice being loved and to return to God.

That's why we come to this communion table time after time. We receive life with open, empty hands, powerless to make life for ourselves, grateful for the food we receive only from God, and we practice receiving it.

We come in solidarity with the one who died for us, and practice surrendering our security in self-giving. We come in unity with others, not seeking our won status but seeking oneness with all.

We live by the Word that comes from the mouth of God. We return to God. Receiving God's own self, given to us in love, we practice being loved.

When we do that, when we return to God and continuously practice our loved ones, it helps us let go of our grasping for power and security and status apart from God. We can trust that we are capable, that we are lovable, that we will survive. And even beyond that, we then become bread for others who are hungry. We become light for people that are struggling in that same wilderness of weakness and temptation—because everybody is struggling in that same wilderness. Everybody's trying to get to that point where they can trust that they are capable and durable and lovable. There is utter security in the risk and the self-giving that we practice. There is our deepest identity in being God's. We do more than just overcome our temptations. We shine with the light of God.