

**Lent 1 2006**

**The Return of the King**

**Mark 1:12-15**

This week's sermon, if it needed a title, might be called "The Return of the King", for two reasons. Our gospel reading gave us first words spoken by Jesus according to the earliest evangelist: the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel. The second reason for the Tolkein title is that what I'm about to say comes as the third instalment of in a week of preaching about sin, grace, God and human beings. Last week I scratched the surface of one of the great Christian controversies – Augustine's critique of Pelagius – and I did so in the context of another complex area of Christian thinking: the relationship between the Old and New Covenants, between the law and Christ, in the writings of Paul. One of my observations last week was that, for Augustine, it is only the love of God which is truly creative. On Ash Wednesday, I suggested that the creating of a new heart for which we ask in Lent was the activity of this same love, the creative love which alone can bring something from nothing.

I sometimes tell people that you are the most erudite congregation in the Church of England. Of course I don't know, I haven't preached to them all. However, even by your standards, this is difficult stuff to get over

from the pulpit. Copies of last week's sermon, and Ash Wednesday's homily, are available at the back of church, and can be read on the parish website. This morning I'd like to continue the theme by saying – appropriately, I hope, for Lent – some more about this tricky subject.

For Paul, remember, the problem is sin. My tendency, your tendency, Israel's tendency to get it wrong, not to choose in accordance with the will of God. And this problem has always been there. In order to help his people along, God provided the law, some specific guidance about which choices to make and how to act. However, the arrival of the law – by showing us what was right – also served to draw our attention to just how badly wrong things actually were. It was analogous to the shining of a light, a light which showed us the way out of our predicament, but also showed us just how bad the predicament was. The law shone its light and showed us that we were in the mire, as well as showing us the way out. And it showed us this simply because, by highlighting the right things to choose, it made it easier for us to notice all the wrong choices being made time and again.

For that reason, says Paul, the letter – the written code – kills. The Spirit, new life in Christ, brings life. Augustine made use of this idea when reminding us that our human wills are just not up to the task on their own, but rather need to be transformed, re-made by the grace of

God. Our old hearts are not able to receive the love which God pours out, and so, in the words of the collect, new and contrite hearts are created for us, brought out of nothing within us, to enable us to contain the love which contradicts all the living for self which our natures seem to enforce within us.

What, then, of Lent? What of prayer and fasting, of discipline and self-denial, what of the practical necessity of combating sin and overcoming temptation. Isn't everything I have said a sign that our efforts are useless, and God alone will act to remake us, if he so chooses? The answer to that question is No, and the reason for that answer is can be gleaned from this morning's gospel.

The spirit gives life, it doesn't take it away, it adds something and does not deny it. And it gives life, that is to say, it gives something which is real and something which is ongoing, to be enjoyed and celebrated, not endured or overcome. God gives life precisely because his will is for human beings to live according to the image and likeness in which we were created, the image and likeness of the selfless love of God. That image, lost through the choice of self above God and neighbour, is restored in the person of Jesus Christ who alone is able to give a perfect self, a human self, to the Father to recreate the image of God in all humanity. That offering of self was completed by the surrendering of

life, but that life would not be contained, but was itself restored, resurrected in the new life of Easter. You and I are Easter people, because we are united to the death and resurrection of Christ, we die and rise with him so that our old self is drowned and a new self, the new heart which is created from the nothing of sin, comes to be within each of us. For Christians, this takes place once and for all in baptism, the sacrament in which the Spirit of life is given to each of us.

This morning's gospel shows Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit, and returning after overcoming temptation to inaugurate first by his words, and then by his actions, the Kingdom of God. What our gospel reading did not make clear is that these things happen immediately after Jesus is baptised in the Jordan by John. Mark gives us, in other words, a clear picture of baptism as the start of something, a point the evangelist was so keen to make that he shows us Jesus himself being baptised, despite there being no sin in him to drown, and rising to receive the spirit's guidance. The life which is given to us in baptism was already present in Jesus. You and I are adopted as God's children when we are united with his son in baptism.

Baptism is not an end, but a beginning, the beginning of the Christian life of discipleship. When we use the word "discipline" in Lent we think extremely negatively, but disciple and discipleship ought always to be

the same, a process of learning. We learn not by inactivity, but by doing, by trying and failing, and we allow ourselves to be taught by acknowledging our failures, and trying to do things differently. This ongoing schooling is the reality of the Christian life, and Lent is the emphasising of that fact, in a manner not unlike the law's ability to shine light on the wrongdoing which is so endemic in human life.

There is no time at which our need to learn from God is more urgent than our preparation to celebrate the new life of Easter. Unless we have discipline, learning, unless we have trained our eyes, then the light which shines from the empty tomb on that third morning will not serve, as the law did, to illuminate our faults: rather, it will serve to dazzle, to render us, however temporarily, unable to see. Blindness to what is revealed is a dangerous thing. If we cannot see, we will not, as Mary Magdalen did, mistake Jesus for another: we will not see him at all. And if we do not see him at all, how on earth can we follow him?