

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark
Glory to you, O Lord.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Following the announcement this week, I've been reflecting on several conversations recently, and the sense of fatigue/apathy/trepidation which comes with facing life after lockdown, indeed, being thrown back into shielding once again.

For some, there has been a sense of - how can anything return to normal? How will I return to the patterns and routines, the work and hobbies I once enjoyed? Even - how will I return? Do I want to?

For others, this has been a year on standby, a fallow year where not much has been able to happen, where little has grown amongst the pain and suffering and grief. I realise that for others, this has been an overwhelmingly busy, stressful and strained year - and we hold each experience to God in our prayers and worship today and every Sunday.

But for those for whom 2020 has been a barren, empty year, I wish to offer a word of hope this morning, and take a closer look at our reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans.

Paul is labouring a point here, but underneath his argument is a really encouraging point to all who have felt hopeless or uncertain in their faith this year.

Paul reminds his Jewish and Christian listeners that God creates out of nothing. Abraham did not have faith in God, but out of that nothingness, God created and gave the gift of faith.

For those who once knew that death was the end of life, God created and gave the gift of faith in Jesus' resurrection. When we find ourselves doubting, questioning, or far from God, it is God who creates and gives us the gift of faith.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, described faith in the same way as love - to have love is to assume love in others, to be loving is to assume that others are loving. God has faith in us, and so gives us the gift of having faith, and being faithful.

This means that in a church community, there will be a rich diversity of experiences of faith. Those who have been constant in the faith for many decades will have received a different gift from those who are new to Christian faith, or who have suddenly had a deeper experience given to them after years of waiting.

As a church, especially as a church beginning a new chapter, we might be tempted to think that we can create faith in those who we encounter. If only we do enough outreach, enough school assemblies, enough work through the night shelter or food bank.

As individuals, we can be tempted to create faith in ourselves. If only we spent more time in prayer, or read our Bible, or came to church more.

Those are temptations - the assumption that we are equal to God in being able to create everything out of nothing. This Lent is a time to lay aside that temptation, and rely on God creating and giving us faith, in God's good time. The church's job is not to give out faith, but rather to be a greenhouse where gifts of faith can grow and flourish.

That starts in the promises we make - whenever someone is christened, married, confirmed, even ordained - the church community promises to walk with them and support them through thick and thin. We do not always get that right, and Lent is a time to acknowledge that, and make amends.

But faith can also be cultivated in our worship, our study, and our time together. We learn to have faith in one another, faith in the power of prayer, faith in what God has spoken to His people across the centuries. Hopefully, we find encouragement and affirmation that God has faith in us, and that the church community reflects that. Again, we do not always get that right - so Lent is a time for the whole church to say sorry, and make a fresh start.

Abraham's story of faith is a deeply troubling one, bringing him to a point where his obedience to God is tested by the request to kill and sacrifice his precious son, Isaac,

the one who brought joy and laughter where once there had been emptiness and sadness.

We cannot be obedient to anyone without trusting them first. Parents of teenagers will know that well, when a teenager tests the boundaries of their faith in their family by being disobedient. The same can be true of our relationship with God - if we do not learn to first have faith and trust in God's almighty love and power, it is much harder to do the things God asks of us.

The church is often expected to be a good, moral teacher - instilling in people how to be obedient, how to make the right choices and how to live the correct life. St Paul's argument, from two thousand years back in church history - is that this moral teaching can only be effective, if it is rooted in a firm faith in God first.

If we know and love God to be a faithful, loving, and life-giving presence in our lives and in the lives of others, if we know that in our hearts, minds and souls, when God leads us in a new direction, we will be obedient to God's call, and live accordingly.

In our Gospel today, Jesus is explaining the strength of his faith in the Father's love, by demonstrating his obedience to God's call on his life - to take up his cross and face death. The parallels with Isaac and Abraham are clear to see. Through his own prayer, study, his sharing with communities and spending time with those closest to God's heart - Jesus receives a gift of faith that his life will have a special role to play in God's purposes for the world.

As we journey on through Lent, these three readings call us to pray for God's gift of faith, whether new or renewed. They call the church to be the greenhouse where faith can grow and flourish. And whatever barren, empty places we find ourselves facing in the months to come - we trust in our faith that God will bring them to light and life. Amen.