

February - Lent 2021

Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches

A year ago we arrived to serve the Vale of Stour and immediately looked forward with anticipation to our first Lent and Easter season with you - the most significant moment in the Christian year where we are drawn inexorably towards the cross... We started Lent WhatsApp daily reflections, we opened Lent study groups and planned special services. But with the coming of Covid much of our plans went on hold and it looks like that may be the case this year too. We recall the memory verse Romans 12:12



Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

And we pray today for all who need the hope God offers.

In preparation for Lent I am re-reading John's Gospel. In John 14 we find Jesus, in the midst of raising Lazarus from the dead saying; *'I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through me.'*

I used to think this verse felt almost arrogant. But as I have reflected a new perspective has emerged. We all fall short of the glory of God, and none of us can enter into God's presence based upon our own goodness. Our weakness and sin separate us from God and there is absolutely nothing that we can do about it.

It is at the foot of the cross that we see with true clarity that God, in Christ, has acted on our behalf. It is God who has stepped towards us, it is God who has come up with a plan, sending his son to take away the sin of the world and to reconcile us to God. So when Jesus says - 'no one can come to the Father except through me', he's not bragging, or making a claim of exclusivity - he is simply saying that only he can and has dealt with our sin.

Suddenly all becomes clear - when Jesus says 'I am' he embodies all that God is, God's nature, perfection, love and justice. The great sermon writer of Hebrews (1:1-3) puts it so powerfully in this credal language; *'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.'*

Jesus who is God, both fully human and divine, is the only one able to do this for us and so it is that we cannot come before God without Christ's intervention on our behalf.

What does this mean for our challenging lives today? I am reminded of the words of Martin Luther King (jr) - as we approach the cross this Easter perhaps his words can be our prayer:

"So I say to you, seek God [in Christ], discover Him and make Him a power in your life. Without Him all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without Him, life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But with Him we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. With Him we are able to rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy. St. Augustine was right—we were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in Him."

Many amongst us and around us are experiencing loss and despair, many are cast low because of Covid and its impact upon our lives. And there seem to be no words we can say in many of these situations that make a real difference. I cling to John 14. *'Do not let your hearts be troubled'* Jesus says, *'believe in God, believe in me...'*

Come - lets us together rise, from the fatigue of this last year, let us rise from the isolation, loss and the grief. Let us travel together to the cross of Christ, lay our troubles down and find rest in him.

May God bless you and keep safe

Rev Alan Combes

Sit us on your shoulders, Lord, we want to go where you go. Carry us to the headland, so we can see ancient paths in new pastures. Let us see your Spirit, dancing through the fields, pollinating, reviving, recreating. Take us to the shore, thrill us in the surf, riding your wave of love. When we fall, gather us up and send us off faithful again with hearts united to dream. Amen.

Michele Sims

For your diary

17th Feb - Ash Wednesday – 6.30pm

Launch of Holy Habits Lent – a live interview with Rev Andrew Roberts

In Room: <https://church.valeofstour.org.uk/VoSLEnt>

17th Feb - Ash Wednesday – 7.30pm

Ash Wednesday Service Livestream

In Room: <https://church.valeofstour.org.uk/vosworship>