

Sunday 9th March 2025, 1st Sunday of Lent. Benefice Holy Communion, Gilling.

Some words from today's Epistle, "for everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved."

Last week I was visiting one of my housebound parishioners who told me she was frightened. Not of anything specifically, just frightened. I have heard of this before with people as they get older, or as they near the end of life. Often people say to me, "I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of dying."

Fear haunts us much of the time, especially when we are tired or anxious about something, or we are struggling with our faith. Words creep into our heads like, "you are beyond being saved", "you will never be good enough", "you are just too bad, even for God's grace."

Fear speaks to us, but those words from St Paul's letter to the Romans today tell us that fear is a liar. "Everyone that calls upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved." That is the promise that God gives us and we can claim, but it is also a promise that brings risk. It does seem that the older we get and the more we experience, the more tentative life becomes. The certainty of youth has given way to the unknown and unpredictable. That is both exciting and frightening, promising and risky. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We can plan and prepare, and chances are many of those things will happen and become a reality, but then there are those surprises that were never expected, uncertainties and interruptions that could not be foreseen or planned for. Some are welcome, others are not. Sometimes we become frightened.

The future is always coming to us in ways we cannot foresee or plan for and it always comes with promise and risk. I am not talking about promise as a simple and

predictable process by which an intention becomes a reality, but something that is completely open ended, something that holds endless possibilities. It's the kind of thing that depends on hope and faith more than it does the passage of time or the completion of an action. The promise says that something is coming but what that is, we don't know. That's life. In human terms, every promise of life, every promise we make, every promise made to us, is accompanied by the risk that it might not be fulfilled or that it won't be fulfilled in the way we want or expect. But if the promise had no risk, it would have no value. Promise and risk are two sides of life and that is the wilderness story of today's gospel.

There, Jesus had decisions to make and so do we, he was offered easy promises by Satan, temptations that held the illusion of promise without risk, but in reality, they are empty promises built on fear and control. But that's not the way the wilderness works, and Jesus knows that, and He replies with the deeper promises of His Father which for Him would bring great risk, which would become reality, but through which He would overcome everything, even death.

We make decisions everyday of our life about what to do, who we want to be, how we want to live. We often feel torn and pulled between the promise and the risk. The wilderness is full of promise and risk, for Jesus and for us. You don't get one without the other.

Think about the decisions before you today, the ones that carry consequences, the ones over which you fret and with which you struggle. What are they? What is it you are really seeking? My guess is what we are after, is life; the chance for more life, the possibility of a new life, the opportunity to be reborn when all has been lost, for

ourselves or for another. The words of Psalm 91 reassure us that `in all these things it is the possibility of a better future, “my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I trust”. That gives us the strength, the faith, the hope, to risk a decision and remain open to the future, even when we don’t know how it will turn out.

Lent is about searching for and learning to stay open to life, to the future that is coming. The things we do or give up for Lent are not to gain God’s approval or to improve ourselves but to help keep us open to the promise of life, that is possible now and in the future.

The wilderness struggle is to remain open to what life will bring. It’s so easy and tempting to close ourselves to the future and we do that in so many ways; fear, anger, hurt, guilt, disappointment, selfishness. What parts of your life have you closed to the future? What would it take to open them? That’s the work for us during Lent, to remain open to life, and to our future. Lent takes each of us through the wilderness to the Cross where all our past, present and futures meet, through to the promise of the glorious freedom of the resurrection on Easter Day, where, if we risk all, our futures are fixed for Eternity.

Today, we don’t know what that future will bring for us. But we can find comfort in the promises of those words of St Paul which take away fear and doubt, give us a treasure to keep and be sure of the certainty that in Jesus Christ there is a present and a future filled with the promise of life and no more fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

