

**First Sunday of Lent,
Sunday, 21st February 2021**



Dear Friends,

***‘You have made us for yourself, O God,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’***
(St Augustine)

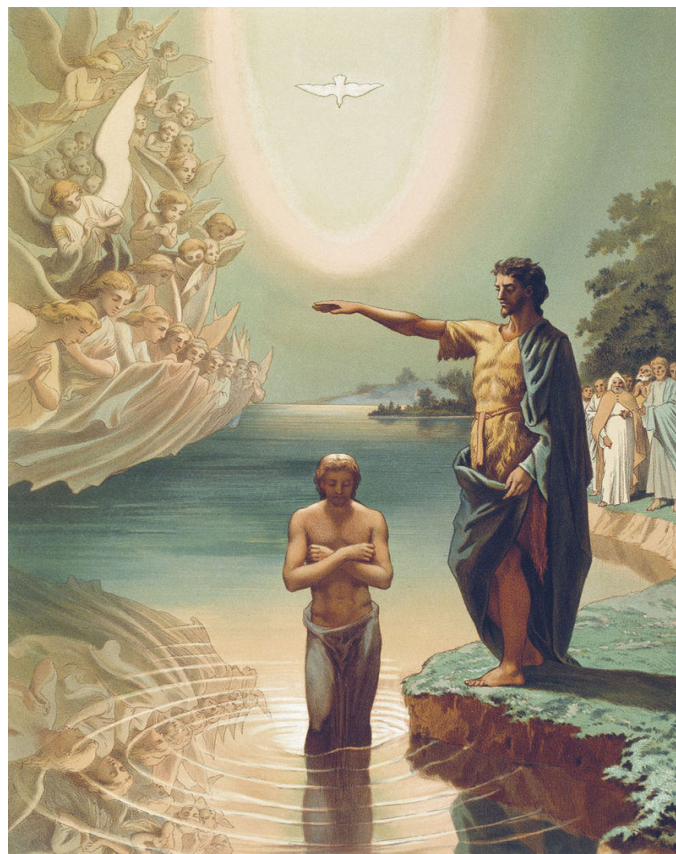
In six weeks’ time we will have come through Holy Week, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to Easter Day, when we will be celebrating Jesus vanquishing death and rising to New Life that lasts for ever. Until then, Christians from all across the world will join together from many rich and diverse cultures and lived experiences to follow the discipline of Lent which began this week on Ash Wednesday. This collective journey of exploration affords us a time of preparation, a time to think carefully about what it means to be a follower of Jesus; a time to do what John the Baptist asks of us: to *‘Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!’* (Mark 1:15) For, as St Paul was to discover in the story of his own transformation through coming to know the good news of Jesus, *‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’* (Romans 10: 13)

In the Church of England’s Lent Course, #LiveLent 2021, which our Benefice began studying by Zoom on Thursday evening, we are being challenged by a simple set of questions in response to St Paul’s proclamation to the people of Rome.

How are people to call on the Lord if they have never heard of Him?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him?

Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in an interview recorded for the #LiveLent programme, spoke of how modern Christians are the equivalent of about Chapter 10 Million of the Book of Acts! For, just as Luke wrote down in Acts the stories describing how the first Christians shared the good news of Jesus Christ to people who had never heard of Him, so it is for Christians today. Many people have no idea what Christianity is all about because no-one has ever invited them to learn! In Chapter 10 Million of Acts, Christians have the opportunity to go out and share the story, both of the Good News we find in Jesus and in the way our own lives have been transformed by His love. If you would like to be part of this journey of exploration, please call the Benefice Office to sign up – details at the foot of this letter under ‘Schedule of Services.’

Many of us have learned about Christianity through people who have shared their faith, by the example of their own way of living in kindness and generosity of spirit or by putting us into Church schools and Sunday schools where we have learned about Jesus through bible study. Others have taught us because the light of Christ seems to shine out of them and we have thirsted to have that same faith and light in our own lives. Another cloud of witnesses to the Christian way comes to us through the Saints and spiritual writers who have blessed us with their understanding of what the Resurrection of Christ has given to the world. John the Baptist is the first of such evangelists who have helped re-set our spiritual compass and pointed us back to God.



'Baptism of Christ' by Grigory Gagarin

St Augustine was a prayerful man whose life was rooted in his own prayerful, relational dialogue with God. *'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'*

In these succinct few words of prayer, Augustine unveils the human purpose as being at one with God and describes our earthly travail as being a journey of discovery until that purpose has been fulfilled. When we look around us today, we can see the ways by which many have found their purpose in knowing they are loved and saved by Jesus. We can also see how many others are still searching. As Christians, it is part of our duty to help them find the peace we have claimed for ourselves. We are contemporary versions of John the Baptist and St Augustine. We are learning from Jesus, through their witness how to help everyone's spiritual compass point home to God!

Jesus, better than any human soul, knew the value and purpose of praying to God. The Gospels tell us that after Jesus had been baptised by John, He went straight off for 40 days and nights into the wilderness to focus on what God really wanted Him to do with His life.

During these six weeks of Lent, our own purpose is to do the same thing. Our repenting, in other words the re-purposing of our lives, is to find our way back through the wilderness of our wayward lives to God through Christ. It is Jesus who comes from the Father to accomplish, through His human journey, the task which will restore us all.



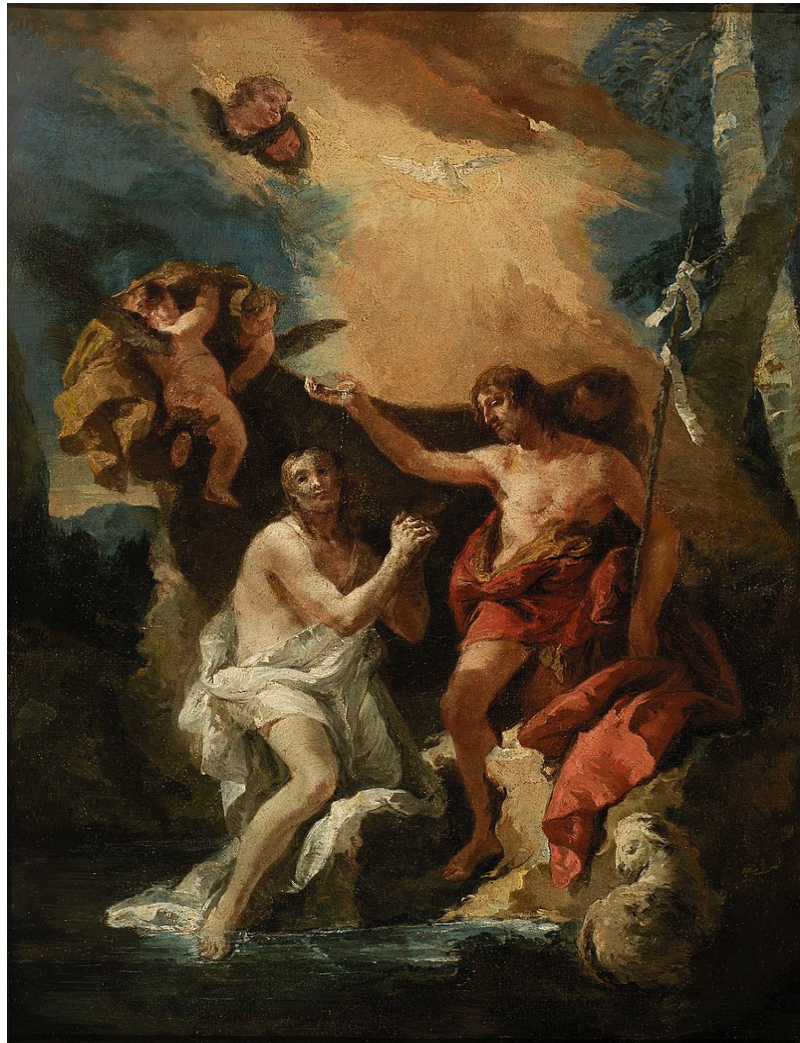
'The Baptism of Christ' by Andrea del Verrochio and his apprentice, Leonardo Da Vinci

In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, the 14th Century mystic, Julian of Norwich, wrote about her own powerful visions of Jesus Christ which had come to her during a time of profound illness:

Pray with your whole being, even though you think it has no purpose for you. Pray with your whole being, though you feel nothing, though you see nothing, even though it seems impossible to you! It is in dryness, in barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness that your prayer is most pleasing to God even though you might think it has little purpose for you.

In these words, Julian was pointing us to an understanding that our human lives are one long movement towards God. Prayer is the moment when we become more aware of the nature of that journey that Christ first made for us on the cross.

It is this movement back towards God through Jesus that is opened up to us all. In following Jesus, we are shown the way back to the Father, learning that our life is not aimless. Rather, it has an eternal destination. Jesus shows us by His example of obedient prayer and faithful listening for God's will for our lives that we have not been left to wander in the wilderness. Quite the opposite in fact: The shepherd has come to find what is lost and bring us home! As Augustine puts it, the ultimate truth of human life is that all our searching leads to God. We are made for God and there will always be an incompleteness until we arrive safely by His side.



'Baptism of Christ' by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo

When we talk about prayer or contemplation, we are really talking about those moments when God enters our lives. Here, when we open ourselves up to receive Him, something happens, about which we might not even be aware! We might not be like Moses, who came down Mount Sinai from his encounter with God with a face so radiant no-one could look at him, but each contact we have with God awakens some spark deep within us that nothing else can touch. Opening ourselves up to God is what makes us come alive. Our own spiritual radiance, in turn, draws others to discover the story of Jesus for themselves.

Prayer during Lent, then, is our compass, our means of re-orienting ourselves with our goal: to move back towards God. The symbol of the cross is another powerful compass – pointing us always to God’s love in Jesus and, at the same time, it points back at ourselves. In the wilderness, we can’t pretend. We’ve got to be honest about who we are and what we are thinking. The first step on our journey is to open our hearts to prayer and allow God to enter our lives. We can spend Lent doing that, remembering to use this time of spiritual contemplation, as I said at the beginning of this letter, as a time of preparation. Lent is indeed a time to think carefully about what it means to be a follower of Jesus; a time to do what John the Baptist asks of us: to ‘Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!’

In a week when the frailties of human life bear heavy on the Royal family, I close with a prayer for Prince Philip, adapted from St. Columba. May Christ’s healing touch be upon him.



Be a bright flame before Your servant, Philip, O God;
a guiding star above him.
Be a smooth path below him,
a kindly shepherd behind him
today, tonight, and for ever.
Alone with none but you, our God
we journey on our way;
what need we fear when you are near,
O Lord of night and day?
More secure are we within your hand
than if a multitude did round us stand.
Amen.

Yours, on a journey in Christ,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

After much prayer, and in response to the ongoing threat to public health of the new and virulent strain of COVID-19, our Benefice of five parishes has decided to suspend in-Church services until further notice in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus. Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

You will find a recorded **Service of Holy Communion for Ash Wednesday** which remains with other resources to view on our website.

As our nation passes the tragic milestone of 100,000 Coronavirus deaths, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are inviting our country to **join together in private prayer at 6pm each evening**, in response to the suffering and sadness the pandemic has brought our world. You will find their letter on our website. Do join in this profound action of love for all affected by this disease.



Collect Prayer for the First Sunday of Lent

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



Mark 1: 9-15 - The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, 'You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.'

The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. 'The time promised by God has come at last!' he announced. 'The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!'