

Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, Lent 3, Yr.C.St.
Mary's Church Wimbledon, 3.3.2013.

"One giant leap for man and wife on journey to Mars" ran a news headline in the Guardian newspaper last Thursday. A US millionaire plans to send a couple on a round-trip to Mars. The actual capsule the couple would travel in would be extremely cramped. The time that the couple would be away from our normal world would be about 500 days. I can think of pleasanter ways of getting away from the world of today!

Other people have used different methods of getting away from the temptations of the modern world. The Amish communities in the U.S.A, for example, remove themselves from the excesses of the modern world and base their existence on a strict interpretation of the Bible and reject modern labour saving devices. They keep themselves separate from modern America.

Sometimes we may like the idea of escaping from the modern world with all the temptations it seems to present. But we are people of the 21st century and we cannot escape that. Yes it is hard to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in today's world however much we may want to do so.

St. Paul reminds us, in our reading from the letter to the Corinthians, of how the Israelites led by Moses escaped from the persecution of Pharaoh in Egypt. Although however they all received the same spiritual food and nourishment, many of the people rejected God and were tempted. As we read in verse five. *"Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness."*

What a contrast to the joyful words of the passage from the Prophet Isaiah that we had for our first reading. Gone are the laments of the suffering servant we read in Isaiah's earlier chapters.

Isaiah moves us forward to the *"Heritage of the Lord's servant."* with the promise of the return from exile and a vision of the New Jerusalem. In our reading for today we have the invitation to share in the fruits of this new age. The new age is of God, not man, foretold by the prophets and therefore inevitable but also everlasting. This is a chapter where God's love for all people in the world is celebrated.

We are all invited rich or poor to eat and drink of the spiritual food and drink that God offers us - nourishment for our souls. God's love and grace are free to all not dependent on ability to pay. How easy it is to be

diverted and use our energy on activities that do not nourish our souls and made even harm our bodies.

We are exhorted to:

*" Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.."*

However many times we fail to live up to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can ask forgiveness and start all over again.

We have to set our sights on a higher heavenly level rather than earthly level. We always encourage children to aim high for academic or sporting or musical achievement. Lent is a time when we can re-assess our spiritual aims and aspirations, and ask ourselves are they high enough.

We put our trust in and rely on the strength of God and our Lord Jesus Christ to lead us on the right pathway. One way to receive this strength is by reading our bibles in an informed way. There are lots of helpful guides available, e.g. the Bible Reading Fellowship has helpful week-by-week or day-by-day guides.

We too get this strength by finding time to pray, to ask Jesus to help us and guide us. In the midst of busy lives it may be lots of 'arrow' prayers shot off to God for help during the crises that occur during the day. We may have time for thought and reflection while we walk the dog, or go for a swim. Or we may just have to be realistic and offer small spaces during each day to God, especially if we have the care of children or elderly or sick relatives. But some way or other we need to find time to receive the spiritual food and drink that is necessary for our souls. You have all found time to respond to God's call today to be here to worship him. To worship in this church on this site which has been a place of worship for hundreds of years. We have all stepped aside from our busyness to be in God's presence. We receive nourishment for our souls in this service of Holy Communion as we receive the bread and wine, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Paul reminds us that we have to be careful that we do not fall into temptation, the temptation to separate ourselves from God. That is what the church calls sin, a separation from God. But we also have words of

encouragement from Paul that God will not test us beyond our strength. So when we are tempted to wander away from God and Jesus Christ's teaching we know we have the assurance of God's help if we ask for it.

As we read our newspapers and listen to the T.V. news we may be appalled at man and woman's inhumanity to other men, women and children. We may be quite condemning in our criticism of the crimes we see portrayed or described and of the people committing them. It is quite right to condemn horrific crimes, or acts of injustice or brutality but we need to leave the judgement to God. Jesus always condemned the sin but not the sinner. In our Gospel passage today we read:

"At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. " He asks the question: "

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that there were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No I tell you; unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.



Then Jesus tells his hearers of the Siloamians who also perished in a terrible accident and again asks the question:
...*"Were they worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?..."*

At that time as now such accidents or incidents were often attributed to Divine judgement or retribution. We may have heard people of a fundamentalist persuasion say after the Tusanmi in Asia, the attack on the World Trade Centre, or the outbreak of AIDs in the early 1980's, these were a result of Divine retribution.

Jesus rejected such teaching and taught that good fortune, or disaster, blessing or curse, success or failure is no indication of our spiritual state before God. God causes the sun to shine on all of us, the righteous and unrighteous. (Matthew 5: 45).

We are called therefore not to shun our world and escape to another planet but to engage with it. When we fail, Jesus calls us to ask God for forgiveness; to pick ourselves up and start over again. When others fail we are to leave them to the judgement of God. Finally we are called to thank God for the abundance of spiritual blessings that are showered upon us and especially the nourishment that we receive in Holy Communion. Amen