

Third Sunday of Lent

PREACHER : Canon Ralph Godsall, Precentor

Sunday 19th March 2006
at St Mark's Church, Bromley, Kent

With just a hint of spring in the air, and green shoots poking through the earth, I am reminded on this Third Sunday of Lent of one of the most beautiful places I know. It is that part of Suffolk where the River Stour winds its way gently through a patchwork of field and ancient hedgerows, past quiet mills and centuries old churches, and which was immortalised by the painter John Constable.

His oldest son, in his diaries, talks about his father with great affection. He describes his two great passions in life, painting and his children. He loved nothing better than to spend whole days sketching in the Suffolk countryside, with his children playing by his side. Then in the evening he painted the final canvas in his studio, again with his children nearby. The diaries describe one notable day when there was to be an exhibition of new works. Critics travelled to Suffolk, full of anticipation to see Constable's latest paintings, and in particular one which was to be unveiled before them that day.

The moment came. Constable walked up to his canvas, preparing to draw the curtain to reveal it. As he did so, there was utter silence, and then some gasps of astonishment, because right across the canvas, from top to bottom, there was a great tear. Eventually everyone left, leaving Constable and his family alone, and wondering about the torn canvas. One of his children, however, was missing. It was his oldest son. Eventually he came home and his father asked him, 'Did you do this?' His son answered, 'Yes, I did.'

I wonder what your father would have said to you in these circumstances? The diaries record that Constable spoke these gracious words to his son – words that he would remember for the rest of his life. He simply said: 'How shall we mend it, my dear?' How shall we mend it, my dear? Words of a father to his son – gracious words that sought to find a way through – words of forgiveness that offered a way forward and did not condemn – words of love to reassure an angry child.

The springtime of the year reminds us that the world we inhabit is a beautiful, if scarred, place. Growing up in rural Herefordshire I remember that this was the time of the year when we gathered primroses and wild daffodils in the woods after church on Sundays, ate crumpets and home-made jam around an open fire, and played cards with our parents in the evenings.

In the Flemish calendar from the sixteenth century Book of Hours, the March occupation is gardening. An aproned gardener dressed in blue, interrupted in his digging, is doffing his hat to the lady of the manor in a pink surcoat with fur cuffs. In the background another is pruning fruit trees; while in a panel at the foot, five plump men are playing a curious game with rattles.

In his poem, *Burnt Norton*, T.S. Eliot writes that 'At the still point of the turning world....there the dance is.....Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance.....'

Gardeners shape their plants by pruning, and each type of shrub responds to different degrees, if it is not to outgrow its strength, run to seed, or smother its neighbour. Painters, musicians and poets prune and reshape their work in the same way; and so may parents in the raising of their children.

Lives with no space, no still point, at their centre may be in need of some hard pruning if they are to grow to their true shape. Over-stimulation with ideas, as well as with food and drink, can sap our spiritual energies. For modern people, reducing the dose of morning news programmes and TV might be just as relevant as more traditional fasting.

Our lives can become stale, unless they are refreshed by the inexhaustible vitality that flows
from the Word
of God. The submerging of the rhythms of the day, the week and the year which connect us to
other parts of
the creation, to the sun and the moon and the seasons, by a hectic life of getting and spending,
leaves us
dangerously exposed to spiritual exhaustion. Paradoxically, as each moment is hyped in a life
which lacks
light and shade, feast and fast, as part of a coherent pattern embracing the whole year, then
everything is
reduced to a dull average. In this state we are vulnerable to the dejection which swept over
Hamlet when he
exclaimed, 'How stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the usages of this world.'

God has prepared a beautiful canvas for us to inhabit, yet we know that that the canvas has been torn. Excessive consumption has plundered the land, polluted the earth, made millions in the developing world live lives of poverty and misery. Our relationships with each other have been scarred; families have broken down; peoples with rich cultural heritages are divided against each other and filled with suspicion and lack of trust. The world we inhabit is torn and divided – sometimes violently – at every level.

So thank God for this morning's lectionary – the cleansing (or pruning) of the Temple by Jesus. And for the question that lies at the heart of this morning's gospel passage: 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'

Jesus' reply amounted to a riddle; the sign was a sheer impossibility, a rebuilding programme to accelerate 46 years' construction work in three days. It must have a meaning – what meaning could it have? And here it is, says John the evangelist. Jesus was speaking of his body.

And why should the destruction and raising of his body be a sign of authority? Because it is the pathway of his authority – the Cross; the only pathway that liberates us precisely from the trading that goes on within families and between Christians. The Cross is God's generosity, his love, his grace to sinners, who bring nothing in exchange except their sins. It is an exchange that brings exchanges to an end – there is no more trading to be done.

John Constable's son expected and deserved punishment. But his father spoke those gracious words: 'How shall we mend it, my dear?' And God, instead of punishing us, so loves us that he sent his son Jesus into the world to save us from tearing ourselves apart. 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17).

As our journey through another Lent continues, let us examine the kind of fast we are keeping. How are we doing with the job of mending? What gifts of reconciliation and healing are we being called to offer? And what about our own personal lives? Where are we experiencing brokenness, torn relationships with others, and division within ourselves? Where do we most need to be healed and restored to wholeness of life?

Perhaps we can bring all this to God as we make our communion together this morning: our need to be healed, to be mended, to be made whole. 'How shall we mend it, my dear?' Here, where Jesus takes us apart with him for a little while, he can point us again to that temple in which we are no longer dealers, but stones – 'living stones' – settling into constructive and mutual interdependence, and built into a spiritual temple, a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Peter 2:5).