

CHESTER CATHEDRAL LENT 1 2010 EUCHARIST

Comedians in the music halls of yesteryear were usually advised by those in the know, never to share the bill with children or performing animals. Experience has shown that children and animals invariably steal the show. Animals like children have an enormous appeal. The animal charities vie with those for children in the popular response. It is also true that children and adults who are young at heart enjoy reading stories where animals behave as if there are people. It has proved an excellent way for writers to challenge the way we live without appearing to insult us. The riverside folk in the *Wind in the Willows*, Beatrice Potter's *Peter Rabbit and Squirrel Nutkin*, the farmyard animals of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the rabbits on *Watership Down* and many others can cause us to reflect on human life and behaviour. I remember from school days on a much lower literary level, our English teacher in a spirited effort to persuade us to live good decent lives told this story which she had learned

in Sunday School.Small African boy taught by his mother if he came across a little snake to take his stick and kill it. One day he spots a small snake but as he dutifully raises his stick the snake speaks - Please do not kill me. I'm ever such a small snake and would never do anyone any harm. So the boy in an act of seeming kindness lets the snake slither away. Years pass - the boy grows up and one day in the jungle he comes face to face with a very large snake - and as the snake crushes him to death it is heard to say - now you see what happen when you fail to kill little snakes with a big stick

It could be claimed that the season of Lent is intended to help us kill the metaphorical snakes we have in our lives with the appropriate big stick. Lent is part of the Church's annual round of feasts and fasts as we trace Our Lord's life and proclaim the Good News of God's love in and through Him. Lent could be described as a tool in that kit bag which is the Xtian religion. It serves to help us to understand better the way of Xt and to live life to the full. Some may want to ask 'How can that be if in the

words of today's Collect being a Xtian involves praying for grace to discipline ourselves? Many would see discipline as limiting freedom. As an undergraduate discipline might suggest that I write that assignment rather than go to the bar with my friends. Again when I am in a hurry another act of discipline prevents me driving on an open road at the speed I might wish to. In fact discipline does not limit of freedom ? Its purpose is rather like that of the stockade in the jungle ? The fact is if we would complete in the 2012 Olympics or the Chester Half Marathon the discipline required in training is essential. The same is true of the musicians who wish to perform in public. A fact so well illustrated both by our cathedral choirs and St. Mary's Ecumenical choir. If we wish to do things well, there has to be discipline. Living the Xtian life is no exception. It may be harder to observe Lent today than it was even a few years ago. We live at a time when it seems that licence to do what we want, when we like is prevalent in contemporary morality. Why shouldn't I do what I like ? As a result it could be claimed that

lack of personal discipline is not only filling our prisons to overflowing but has put us towards the bottom of the league among developed countries when it comes to the well being of our children. It could be claimed that dysfunctional family life is the result of at least one parent not being prepared to make those disciplined sacrifices family life demands. Our freedom to live life to the full - to have personal satisfaction because we are living in the way God intends us to live is constantly threatened by our personal whims and desires, Today this is made so much greater by the pressure of advertising and the norms presented in TV soap operas.

After His Baptism when He had realised that He was the Xt, Jesus, being fully human, was tempted to do what he wanted, rather than what was right. The three temptations we heard from St. Luke's Gospel are about how He would carry out His ministry as the Messiah. There came into Jesus' mind three short cuts by which He could show people God's way. He might provide bread and get a quick response to His message through

what we might describe as cupboard love. It is a temptation to which political parties may be prone in an election year. Then Jesus might use His power to force people to follow. That is way the world continues to believe can get results but rarely had the desired outcome. Finally He might impress people with a circus feat which is guaranteed to attract the crowd, at least for a time. These were quick fixes which Jesus had the gift to use if He so chose but in the wilderness as he wrestled He saw they were not the way to show God's love.

To withstand the power of temptation in each case. Jesus called to mind the faith and the insight of his forefathers - the OT Scriptures as showing that better way. From this starting point He found the strength to reject the temptations He faced. In other words when the crunch came Jesus used the tools his religion provided for good purpose. The lessons learned from childhood stood Him in good stead.

On this first Sunday in Lent we pray that God will give us grace - that is His strength, to discipline ourselves in obedience to His Spirit. Lent provides us with an opportunity to take stock, to have a spiritual spring clean by examining our lives and the direction we are going, to look at our values. As a starting point we may use the 10 Commandments. What in practice has become our top priority - God or our hobby, our money, our bodies, this cathedral, support for Manchester United... We might get a surprise if we took time to work out how much time and money we spend on these things. Do we find time for rest - treat our parents with respect....are we faithful to our spouse....if we get the chance do we try to evade paying our tax due the tax man...are we green with envy of those next door or of the couple who won £56m..... ? If for the Xtian sacrificial love is the hall mark of our lives what about our addictions - for example - grumbling - saying uncharitable things....being unwilling to share what we have.....wasting time.....failing to see a need to which we can respond.... being over confident..... Put like that the list of possible temptations can be seem long. Thankfully few of us have them all, all the time. The point is if we have done that basic homework - our self

examination and are ready to face the reality of where we are in our lives, then we can, with God's help begin to kill the little snakes - the habits , the failures to do what we ought to be doing with the big stick of our Lenten discipline. I do not think it matters too much whether we give up things or take things on. To take a physical example if we are eating too much so that our weight is limiting our lives, then giving up chocolate for Lent might be a freeing experience but if our weight is not limiting our freedom, then offering to do the old person next door's garden is a more positive Lenten exercise to show our love. Those are practical things to help order our lives in the way of Christ. Yet there is something even more basic which needs to be addressed. My sense is that Jesus went into the quietness of the wilderness principally to discover God's will. Our Lenten discipline should be motivated by that desire to know God, to renew our faith in Him. We could do worse in pursuit of than by a disciplined reading of our Bible..... By joining a Lent group,

by coming to worship more frequently . Perhaps the crucial question to ask is how is my faith in Xt influencing the decisions I make - the way I behave - from what I do with my time, my money to how I decide to vote in the coming election. What matters is that like the Israelites in Deut. being thankful for the gift of life, for the hope we have in God's love and mercy shown to us in Jesus we present the basket which is our lives to the Lord - a life of love and service which is pleasing to him, sharing His love and making the world He created a better place. To use Lent well we need to pray 'Almighty God, give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save thro. Jesus Xt. Our Lord.