

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Amen

Neither of today's two readings can be described as a bundle of laughs!

The first reading, from Deuteronomy, is part of one of the most important passages in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. It's the final speech of Moses to the Israelites before his death. He has led them for 40 years, from the initial confrontation with Pharaoh where he forced him to let the Jewish people go, through the long journey in the wilderness, where he brought them food, the Manna in the wilderness, struck the rock to bring them water when they were suffering from drought, gave them the Law on the stone tablets, and the Ark of the Covenant to house them, until they reached the River Jordan, which they would cross to enter the land promised to them. But Moses was not allowed to lead them at this final stage for an infraction of the commands that God had given, which most of us would see as trivial, that final leadership rôle passing to Joshua. But Moses was allowed to climb Mount Nebo, from where he could look across in the land flowing with milk and honey. But, before that, he delivers his final address and gives them his final words of counsel and instruction. At the heart of that is today's reading. "*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... choose life.*" If they follow God's commandments, then they will flourish, living in the land that they have been given, enjoying its gifts and promise of long life. But if they do not, following the path that they have chosen, and bowing down to other gods, then disaster will follow. And much of the rest of the Old Testament story reports how the Israelites failed to follow God's commandments with the inevitable resulting punishment, culminating in the Babylonian captivity, the most devastating event in Jewish history

The Gospel reading is also challenging, if in a somewhat different way. It comes in the middle of some significant stories: the sending out of the 12 to proclaim the coming Kingdom, the feeding of the multitude, Peter's affirmation, '*You are the Messiah of God*', and it will be followed by the Transfiguration. He starts by outlining what will happen to him in the coming days. He has told them before, but they have failed to take it in; all the evidence suggests that they won't take it in until they have experienced the crucifixion and the resurrection. And then he spells out the challenge of following him. Those who seek to do this must take up their cross, and must be prepared to lose their lives in this world if they seek the eternal life that God is offering.

Both readings present an enormous challenge. There are important differences between them. For Moses, the challenge is for the people God has chosen, and the promise is for this life. While it is true that Jesus calls his disciples to be members of the Kingdom, to be parts of his body, it is each individual who must take up the Cross, and it is in the life after death, and not in this world, that the promise will be fulfilled.

So, what does this say to us, as we begin our journey through Lent?

We probably all grew up with the idea of 'giving something up for Lent', a continuation of the idea of a Lenten Fast, at a time earlier in the Church's history when serious ideas of days or seasons of fasting were an important part of Christian practice. Not so much today, when 'dry January' is about as far as we go, and that, I suspect, is almost entirely secular. In any case, in the middle of a lockdown when we have had to give up so much, from the physical Eucharist to the chance to be with families and friends, any further giving up seems over the top.

But we also see Lent as a time to prepare ourselves prayerfully to experience again with Christ the events of Holy Week, the Last Supper, the Cross and the joy of Easter morning. It is a good and proper thing to do, part of our responsibility as Christians. But it is not an end in itself. Indeed, the Crucifixion and Resurrection are also not ends in themselves. Where we go in their light is something that must be foremost in our hearts and minds. What God is calling us to do, to be, when the Easter celebrations are over should engage our thoughts and prayers this Lent.

And this is where this morning's readings have something to say. We are called, as Moses reminds us, to *'love the Lord our God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances'* so that God will bless us, not just in our time, but in the age to come, and we must seek to follow him, by taking up our cross daily that, in the words of the old Collect *'we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal'*. May that be our challenging but joyful task this Lent.