

The Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Heineken: it refreshes the parts that other beers cannot reach. The advert for the Dutch beer in the 1970s- whilst only running for a short time- has become iconic. Of course, it would be impossible to make today. Which parts is it referring to? Why can other beers not do so? None of it is justifiable: but it is undoubtedly a captivating use of words. Advertising standards though, are no longer about captivating words. To the annoyance of many advertisers, you sort of have to give evidence for your claims these days.

Today my social media feed and email inbox and just about every part of our public spaces- be they physical or digital- are taken up with adverts for wellness. For the idea that our lives are in need of refreshment. This refreshment tends to be much more puritanical than the idea of a refreshing continental lager. It involves intermittent fasting, food supplements, innovative ways to exercise. And apps, endless apps. Like with Heineken, they are, of course, about selling things. This refreshment, like Heineken's refreshment comes at a price. I wonder how long it will be before the lifestyle adverts of the 2020s begin to look as outdated as the beer adverts of the 1970s.

Christianity has good news in this regard. It can and does refresh. And refreshes in ways that are beyond the scope of a cold lager on a hot day, or even of an elaborate self help programme and it isn't trying to sell you something: rather it's encouraging you to accept something that is freely given and can be freely received. It is the refreshing idea that our value comes not from what we do or who the world says we are but from the fact that we are known and loved by God. It is the truth that we fall short, and are not as we should be, but, but that despite that we are loved and we are forgiven.

That is the good news referred to in the Gospel this morning. But, whilst it is freely given and freely received, it does require something from us. Not because God is transactional- a God who needs us to do things. He is omnipotent after all. No, we have to do something on our part because that is how forgiveness works.

We know this to be true in our own lives. To be able to forgive- especially when we have been very deeply hurt- requires repentance, requires someone to say sorry and, crucially, to mean it. To get to that stage, of course, there has to be an acknowledgement that something is wrong in the first place.

That is what the cycle of confession and absolution has at its heart, that is what Lent is all about. By acknowledging things that are wrong, we free ourselves to be forgiven. This, though, is the difficult part. Because we often think that naming things as being wrong is a sign of weakness or a sign of a lack of self worth. Yet, those things remain there, and remain wrong. Remain painful. And failing to name them gives them more power.

Very often they will be those things which it is hard to put our finger on, those things which lurk in the pits of our stomachs, or at the back of our brain. Those things which taunt and haunt us in the small hours of the morning. Those things we know to be wrong but which we struggle to address, sometimes struggle even to name. Fear, dread, insecurity: these are the fruits of this wrong. Even today, we call them 'our demons'. Why? Well because we acknowledge that these things can torment us, and, perhaps, that they aren't things over which we have control.

Admitting that is the first step to real belief in the good news. To admit there are things we cannot control, admit there are things we can control and which we still do wrong. By naming it, we liberate ourselves from their power. From the control they have over us and who we are. That is why repentance is necessary. Because it who we are is to be redefined as being loved by God, then these other things which define us have to be put out the way.

Repentance therefore, isn't about beating ourselves up, it is about honesty. About addressing those invidious It is about a lightening of our load. It is about giving our burdens to one who can and does carry them. This is what we seek to do in Lent. To name what is wrong and to put things aside and thereby lighten our load.

In the Prayer Book service we have at 8 o'clock, just before communion, the congregation hear what are known as 'the comfortable words' that Christ says to his people, says to us: 'come unto me all who travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you'.

Repentance is about acknowledging that we are heavy laden, the good news is that Christ is there ready, willing and able to take on that load, to bear those burdens. And to do so in order to refresh us. Why? Because he loves us.

May this Lent be a time of refreshment for us all. Not in the sense of the secular detox nor in the sense of Heineken's campaign but in the deeper truer sense of refreshment. A refreshment of the soul. A redefinition of who we are.

But let it not stop there. Having been refreshed what are we to do? Well to share that good news, to continue the cycle of our own repentance, to go and bring the Kingdom of God, the ways of justice and beauty and truth, near to those who are in desperate need of that self same refreshment. For that is the evidence the advertisers will need if we are to continue to call ourselves followers of Christ.

This Lent, come, repent, believe, be refreshed in the parts of your life which nothing else can reach. Then go forth, and bring others to that refreshment as well.

In the name etc.