

SUNDAY MARCH 14^H 2021

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT.

About today's Readings

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus refers to an ancient story which was well-known to his audience, and which is told early on in the Old Testament. It tells how the people of Israel, while struggling through the wilderness on their forty-year journey to their Promised Land, were beset by poisonous snakes which caused many deaths. And Moses was told by God to forge the image of a snake in bronze metal, and to set it up high on a standard where everyone could see it. And the mysterious promise was made that whoever looked with the eyes of faith at the bronze image of the serpent, would not die, but would be healed of their poisonous bite.

Now, as we journey through Lent - and we have come to the half-way point in Lent - we hear Jesus saying that this peculiar incident was a prophecy - a foretaste - of what he himself would achieve. The serpent - the sign of death - was lifted up for all the people to see; and as they looked on it, they were given - not death but life. **Now**, says Jesus, the cross - the sign of human death - will be lifted up with him nailed to it, for all the world to see - and if we look on that cross with the same eyes of faith, then we will find that the cross brings the same thing to us - not death, but life - the saving life of Christ crucified, so that the whole creation can be set free, and light and life can triumph everlastingly over darkness and death.

Today's second reading, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, reminds us that Jesus did not come just to save us **from** something - he came also to save us **for** something. And that "something" is our life as a son or a daughter of God. Through the mercy and the goodness and the graciousness of God we are transformed: we become more fully and truly what God always meant us to be. **And**, says St. Paul, it is all about the richness of the love and grace and mercy of God: we are called to see goodness not so much in terms of "keeping commandments" but rather in terms of our making a return of love to a God who first loved us: the initiative being always his, and not ours.

Lent is a solemn season, and yet the very first word on the opposite side of this leaflet, in the Entrance Antiphon for today, is the word "Rejoice". Lent is not just about being solemn and serious - important as that is. Lent is also a time to open ourselves to become all the more filled with gratitude for all that God has done for us; and if we get that balance right, then we will be the better equipped for our solemn observance of Holy Week and Good Friday, as the most serious - and yet also the most important - part of our Church year; and as the most important few days that this world has ever known.

Some prayers for today, and for the week ahead.

We pray that the Church may be a sign to the world that truth and goodness and love cannot be defeated. We pray that Christians everywhere may be united in courage and strength and resolve, in order to bring victories of good over evil in our daily lives, and into the lives of those with whom we have dealings; and we pray that we ourselves may emerge from this Lent having experienced a new "cleansing" - an inner renewal in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for ELIZABETH our Queen, and we also pray especially for the Duke of Edinburgh following his recent surgery, and his prolonged time in hospital. Following the recent Budget, we pray for all who work in the world of finance and economics, and for all people who will be affected - for better or for worse - by recent national financial decisions and policies. We pray for all in Government, in Parliament, in public life, and those in positions of authority and influence in our country, and we ask that we may be governed and led in everything which is right and good.

We continue to pray for all who are caring for other people medically; particularly those administering Covid vaccinations in this country and in every country; for those working in Intensive Care to nurse those most seriously affected by the pandemic; and for medical practices, hospitals, emergency services and front-line carers everywhere. We give thanks for the signs of encouraging news, as vaccination increases, and as the results of vaccination and Lockdown become clear. We pray for continuing progress in overcoming the Pandemic, and for strength and resolve to continue to do what is asked of us, and not to rush into a hasty disregard for the restrictions and disciplines.

We pray for the sick: Anne Barber, Beth Beecham, Gerry Bond, Anne Carter, Lizzie Checkley, Carole Cresswell, Janet Dann, Peter Davey, Sue Davis, Julie Evans, Kieran Hooper, Jill, Rene Leufgen, Jack Luscombe, Jackie Lynch, Mike Hammett,1 Pamela Macey, Diane Squires, Kathryn Tregenna, Lena Tucker, Verity, Glyn Walker and Rita White. We pray also for Roger Pack and his family, at their time of bereavement.

We pray for those who have died recently, including those who have died of the Covid-19 Pandemic locally here, and also in any part of the world. From our community, we remember especially Mike Crossland and Valerie Pack who have recently died. And we also remember those whose anniversary of death falls at this time, among them Loveday Rowle (1990) and Martin Rossman, Priest (2013).