

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

The First Sunday of Lent 2015 at 11.00am

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What can Lent and the repetitive theme of forty days or years illustrated throughout the Bible tell us about the deep desire for the transformation for Christians, our society and nation? I want to begin the measure of the forty day or year principle with Noah. I wonder if Noah was a strategic planner, focused on predicting the future flood and destruction, based on the historic trend of the failed human relationships with God. Noah invested heavily in gathering all the resources available and produced a directive for those around him to execute. Build an Ark. That was the aim. What we learn from his experience of forty days and nights is that planning for the future is important, but when the unexpected comes, remember that the storm will not last forever. Noah's world was flooded and the storms came and came. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by unexpected events in your life? The unexpected bill or redundancy from work. Unexpected ill health. Think of the unexpected devastation caused by terrorists recently. No matter how much we plan our security on reduced resources, and the unexpected happens, planning is responsible to safeguard others who are vulnerable and at risk. Noah knew this. The forty days of turmoil eventually stopped, because it wasn't forever. So, giving up is not an option. Waters will recede and you will once again step on firm ground. Noah's forty days teaches us to be alert to the global impact of disaster and devastation on the lives of innocent citizens, and we must do all we can to pressure those in power to protect the vulnerable and all nations across the globe.

Moses spent forty years in the wilderness. Moses led his people out of slavery into a period of being lost in a wilderness. The waiting and the wandering was so challenging that the people complained so much they missed slavery and wanted to return – some did! They complained to Moses and Aaron who secured their liberty from the Egyptians. Yet, freedom seemed harder than slavery. Yes, of course, liberation is riskier than remaining passive. Freedom is costly, not comfortable. Moses came to know what it meant to be unappreciated by the complaining ungrateful people. So, he went for a retreat on Mount Sinai for forty days and left his brother to it. He shows the necessity to have time to think and reflect, especially amidst uncertainty and before making tough decisions. When he came back he was faced with yet more confrontation and discord. Yet, he remained steadfast and resolute to the vision of new possibilities promised by God. Like Noah before him, God made a promise and covenant. This Biblical narrative teaches us that people who are never happy, never

pleased, never satisfied, and never impressed have always been with us. The constant complainers and agitators will never be happy. They will drain energy and thwart promise and possibilities. So, they must not be permitted to steal happiness or block the vision of possibilities. Moses knew the forty years would bring promise in the end, even though he would never see it himself. Moses was bold enough to argue thoughtfully with God (Exodus 4.10). He is thoughtful and courageous and accepts the challenges, whereas Aaron surrendered to the people's emotional pressure and abrogated his leadership and responsibility, taking the soft option for peace at all cost.

Moses sent scouts to conduct a reconnaissance of the land of Canaan for forty days. The scout patrol returned with fear and defeatist talk. They said, 'sure enough, the land is great, full of milk and honey and fruit, but the people are huge, like giants. We cannot possibly deal with them.' They spread the news 'we felt like tiny grasshoppers compared to them.' The problem wasn't that there were giants in the land (pause). Their problem was that they saw themselves as grasshoppers. Moses understood that the aggressors of oppressive regimes must not intimidate his nation. The focus in Lent in the lead into the May election as Christians, we must vote not as grasshoppers, but as giants of change to bring more resources and support for the vulnerable of our society who live constantly with the defeat of feeling they are nothing more than grasshoppers.

Elijah's forty days has a word about mental illness. Poor depressive Elijah in 1 Kings 19 wanted to give up. People were out to get him and he ran away. He was, as the story tells us, the victim in danger. He felt so bad he wanted to die. But encouraged by others he travelled forty days to Mount Horeb. Elijah was depressed. At his lowest ebb in life and couldn't see a way out. Depression and disappointment happens to us all at some time or other. Some people live with depressive illnesses every day with crucifying consequences on family. Reports claim that depression and anxiety among children have increased considerably, with over 80,000 children in the UK suffering from the illness, 8,000 below the age of ten. They experience unprecedented pressure of assessment in school, sexualisation, consumerism and pressure to have a perfect body. Last year the NHS prescribed 53 million anti-depressant medications, twice as many as ten years ago, and 25% higher than last year. This is a worrying indictment on our society and the Government. Depression is disabling for anyone, but especially children and adolescence. If Elijah had given up on the 39th day he would not have reached Horeb and go on to make a difference to others. One more day, and one more day, and one more day, until the day happens when we finally realize that God created us for life and they are of great value to God, his Church and society. It is the responsibility of us all to watch over and care for

those living with this disabling illness, especially children and the young.

And so we come to Jesus' forty days in the desert. Lent is the story of Jesus' conversation in the desert with the devil. How can we interpret this for 21st Century Christian living? Put simply, Jesus is tempted to sell his integrity as a human being. Evil calls him to a reward of wealth and power that would have benefited him alone if he colluded with evil. Jesus responded emphatically, 'my integrity is not for sale. There is more to live than money and power'. He cannot be manipulated by evil, in whatever guise. Politicians with influence must not sell out our NHS, education, unemployment, disability, care of the elderly, immigration, poverty, to manipulators, for financial gain for the wealthy, or bureaucrats. They could learn a great deal from the discipline of Lent and the Biblical characters who crafted their identity amidst struggle with deep integrity for the benefit of the societies they served.

Perhaps for Lent we would do well to give up manipulation, complaining, guilt, being grasshoppers. We are not called by God to lose ourselves in a Lenten narcissistic massage of feeling good that we have given up chocolate or alcohol. The forty days of Lent may challenge us not to collude with the barren wilderness of the manipulations of social and economic inequalities or political and intuitional evil; so that those we live among will see the transforming love of Jesus Christ through our engaging with the struggles of others, and build God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Spend the forty days of Lent praying and believing in God's promise, like Noah, Moses and Jesus did. Hoping and believing in new possibilities for our communities. God's promise of rainbows, land and life everlasting can then, hopefully, become a reality for us all.

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