The Manse

The Threshold of Lent: Looking to Easter

Lenten Prayer

Isaiah Chapter 58 verses 6–9

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
   and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
   and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
   and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
   and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
   and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
   and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
   you will cry for help, and he will say: Here I am.

Dear friends of St John’s and St Leonard’s in the Fields,

As we look forward to all that Lent will reveal, about our pilgrimage, our sacrifice, our self-denial, yes even our self, it is providential possibly that I am writing this on the 17th of February: a date sadly synonymous with sacrifice, indeed martyrdom, for it was on this day in 1977 in Uganda that Bishop Janani Luwum was murdered by the brutal regime of Idi Amin, most strangely the same date as Father Max Kolbe, the Polish Priest, was arrested in 1941 and taken to Auschwitz where within three months he too was killed.

Bishop Luwum’s statue sits above the West Door of Westminster Abbey, a sacred Church I visited five years ago this very week and the place where also Max Kolbe’s statue stands alongside eight other 20th C Martyrs. The retiring Archbishop of York John Sentamu fled Uganda with his wife within three weeks of their wedding in those troubled days of the 1970s and has recounted details of his meeting with Janani Luwum, the clergyman who had been a teacher and who was converted at a Christian rally, a meeting in which he said to Sentamu, then a High Court judge, “We must be Christ to these people….” He was referring to refugees from Sudan and others who were persecuted in Uganda, and he went on to say “Be our advocate and take up their cases.” Sentamu did until one day he knew that unless he escaped he would die there. He came to England, ended his legal days and trained to become a minister of the church. His qualities of leadership, discipline, love were recognised and his charisma shone through to enable him to become for these recent years the Archbishop of York.

As we fill our Lenten “Jars of change, jars of grace,” may we be reminded not only of the physical and human needs of so many areas of our world, where tragically lack of water, resources, education and skills can bring chaos sadness and anxiety, but also of the cost which is so high for so many Christian people whose daily journey to survive, whose pilgrimage of faith, especially in Lent is sorely tested.

May your Lent meditation, sacrifices and self-denial, align you even more with the life of Jesus and may you be strengthened for service and witness just as Janani Luwum was. The statue stands with a sense of humility, his pastoral staff is firmly held as is also an open Bible. Luwum knew that all of us were under the authority of God’s word, that we are the flock of the great Shepherd and, as we minister one to another, so we serve Christ and place our footsteps in his, to go wherever He leads us.

May God continue to hold you in the hollow of his hand and to bless you and your families as we enter Lent and journey to the Cross over six weeks… and beyond.

With all good wishes

 John