

## **'Time of Change' in the Croydon Circuit**

### **Thoughts for Lent 2010**

**by Harvey, the Superintendent minister**

Sunday 21 February

Lent 1 'Back to the desert!'

- Introductory thoughts:

It is a pity we often think of the season of Lent as a time to make ourselves uncomfortable in some fiddling and irritating way. It is an even greater pity when we think it is a time to indulge in a good grovel before a pseudo-Lord, as if spirituality is about cow-towing to a god who needs appeasing and who we feel really despises us all!

No, the Church through the centuries has given us some better guidelines. From the outset, Lent is predominately about things that happen in the Desert, the wilderness. The first Sunday in Lent traditionally recalls the impact of Jesus's time in the desert after his baptism in the Jordan.

In our Circuit, we could do well to consider the desert experiences of Jesus and see how they can help us think carefully and deliberately about our mission and purposes in our local church life. I want to invite the churches of our Circuit to enter into the desert, to face up to our waste places and recognise that such an activity is a necessary part of our life of faith.

But we need to encourage ourselves to do this – after all, Jesus was 'driven' into the desert places by the Spirit of God. Perhaps we too need to be 'driven' to see any benefits in looking at our empty, dry and lonely aspects of our spiritual life.

- First pointer: we must recognise how we are tempted to domesticate God, to make him manageable and describable.

Jesus was tempted to 'fix' his needs, his hunger – but God must not be seen as the world's great 'fixer', the one who solves all our problems and meets all our needs. Popular culture would like to think that God is like a celestial 'superman' who saves the world by intervening into our lives with divine power and, at best, with super-natural glory.

Wouldn't it be great if God would provide us with some clear direction for the future of our Circuit? Wouldn't it be good if God gave us a clear indication of how many leaders, lay and ordained, we needed for the growth of Methodism in Croydon? It would help us so much if God could tell us unequivocally how many, and which, buildings we really need for effective mission in these times of change!

But God is God, and not an extension of our will.

Just as Jesus was faced with this temptation in the desert, I believe we must face it too here in our local church life. We must ensure that we are not projecting our wishes, our hopes, and our aspirations into the future direction of the church. We must, instead, let God be God – and this takes us to the:

- Second pointer: the desert is a place of struggle and complaint.

When the children of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years they famously made a complaint ‘Is the Lord in our midst or not?’ This is not unlike Jesus’s struggles in his 40-day period in the desert as well as his despair in the Garden of Gethsemane ‘Is the Lord here or not?’

Sometimes it is a real struggle to discern God’s will, but many people would prefer to have a ‘simple gospel’ – a spirituality which is deeply suspicious of questions, struggles, complaints. It is wrongly assumed that too much questioning and enquiry leads us to a place of emptiness and disbelief. But who among us has ever reached the point of saying:

I used to feel all was well, that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world; that my faith made perfect sense. But now – my work doesn’t interest me, life is like a slow progression of dusty greyish events, and my beliefs are a muddle, and I’m not really sure what I believe any more?

If such sentiments ring true for any of us, then we can say that what I have been describing is the true Lent, the real Lent.

It is the necessary Lent process for us in our ‘Time for Change’ thinking to face up to the reality that the church’s future is a dry, dusty and grey matter for most of us. But it is vital we face up to this reality in ourselves fairly and squarely, and then we can move on to the next stage.

- Third pointer: the desert reveals the true nature of our longings.

With his replies to the devil, Jesus demonstrated his longing for the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom where people live for more than bread alone – for freedom for all, for justice for all, for forgiveness for all, for openness for all, for life with abundance for all.

The future shape of our churches must take such things into account. The churches in which we worship God do not live for our needs alone. We are instead ‘the only community which exists for the benefit of others’. Our future resources, buildings and numbers of leaders must be determined by the measure of our longing for the fullness of God’s Kingdom in our communities.

Part of our Lenten experience must be an exploration of the level of our sense of *longing* for freedom, justice, hope, healing, fullness of life, integrity, compassion for everyone without reserve in our communities and throughout Croydon.

- Summary thoughts:

The true observance of Lent has to do with these three great themes:

- a) The temptation to make God in our own image, manageable and describable;
- b) The recognition of the need to Struggle with the presence of the reality of God;
- c) The sense of Longing for the growth of the Kingdom of God.

If we accept these wilderness experiences, we will not only find that 'angels will come and attend to our needs' as they did with Jesus, but also (as we fully embrace them) we shall find that

'our Lent is Easter in disguise',

as it is with Christ.

Let us take our 'Time of Change' in the Croydon Circuit with great seriousness and determination; let us allow ourselves to be 'driven' into the desert places during Lent.

Harvey Richardson  
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