

Lent 3 B  
“Words to Grow By”  
Ex 20.1-17; Ps 19; 1 Cor 1.18-25; John 2.13-22

<sup>14</sup> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Not all growth is good. I have a climbing rose bush outside my dining room window which grows so enthusiastically it needs periodic discouragement from joining me at the table. During lockdown, many of us discovered the growth of our waistlines to be a negative effect of working at home within close reach of comfort food.

Sometimes it's helpful to look at a meaning by noting its opposite. The opposite of 'growth' is 'drift'. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us with these words: "...we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." (Heb 2:1)

Both **drift** and **growth** effect gradual changes. We can only see growth of a plant with time-lapse photography and we only recognise distance in a relationship when we eventually fail, and the expected Christmas update does not arrive. Because both can occur without being obvious, we need to be warned against drift, and to be intentional about achieving positive growth.

Our readings for this third Sunday in Lent show us how God cares for us and nurtures our growth. Like a wise parent, he has set boundaries to give us standards to live by, and he encourages us in his wisdom (as opposed to worldly values), so we can grow in love for him and those around us.

Through the past year, we have been living under new and everchanging rules, regulations and laws as a result of the very unpredictable Coronavirus pandemic. Conforming has required us to act out of love and respect for all those around us. But God's boundaries are different - much more far-reaching and heart-changing.

I will pose three questions for each of us to answer this morning.

1. How do we need to grow in our Christian life?
2. How will we intentionally use the season of Lent to work towards these goals?
3. How will we measure our growth?

**1. How do we need to grow in our Christian life?**

Our Exodus reading describes God giving Moses the ten commandments. Although we hear a number of negatives, behaviours we should not fall into, these commandments are guides to right living in how to approach the Lord our God with the respectful worship he both demands and deserves. The commandments are also God's invitation to live rightly in the community of faith.

The Law is good news. It reminds us that our God is the God who leads us out from our slavery to sin and forward into the Promised Land of new life in Christ. Through the commandments, we know where the lines are drawn in the sand. We know the standards God has set. These are not ideals for us to achieve on a good day when we feel strong and capable, but the standards God set so long ago as a summary of right and holy living, unchanged for us.

These commandments were not spoken with a still, small voice, personally to Moses, but with the blast of a trumpet accompanied by thunder and lightning for further emphasis, to all the people.

That was so long ago, we are tempted to ask God if he really meant these commandments as absolutes, or might we need to modify them to suit our present society. Listen to the voice of temptation: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen 3:1) A couple of thousand years later, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness: "If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." (Luke 4:7)

## **2. We progress towards our goal of growing closer to God -**

by follow the example of Jesus, knowing and using the authority of scripture. This was how Jesus answered and refuted the worldly logic of Satan's temptations. Such knowledge equips us with God's wisdom and enables us to know how to act and speak according to God's standards for right and holy living, thus promoting spiritual growth and preventing an almost imperceptible drift into temptation.

Psalm 19 gives us a pattern for worship. Last week we were reflecting on "Words to worship by" and noted that even though we may sometimes feel abandoned, we never are. Even through a wilderness experience, we heard the previous week, God is always with us. Our praise is not conditional on how close we feel to him. We worship him for who he is, but the better we know him, the more reasons we can find to worship him.

We become better acquainted with a person we have recently met through spending time with them, through talking with them, through discovering their

personality and character, their likes and dislikes. We come to know God better through prayer. We grow in holiness, we become more aware of his presence with us, and we praise him more because he is the Lord our God. Today's psalm begins by proclaiming how the heavens "are telling the glory of God" without ever uttering a word! Jesus told us "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matt 5:16)

It is through knowing the law that we grow in wisdom, as our souls are revived, our insights are informed, and our hearts rejoice. Psalm 19 tells us: The law of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul, the decrees, the precepts and commandments, the ordinances are more to be desired than gold.

Paul aimed to correct unchristian ideas and inappropriate behaviour within the new Christian church in Corinth. God it seemed, worked in contradictory ways with values that the world despised. But then, from many OT accounts, we know of ways God has worked outside the world's structure. Think for example, of Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac born in their old age.

Much closer to Paul's time God's plans had resulted in Jesus being crucified on a Roman cross. In today's reading, Paul writes "For the message of the cross is foolishness"; it is through this apparent foolishness that God worked so powerfully to save all who believe.

The cross was the Romans' most degrading and humiliating method of execution, for the most notorious of criminals and insurrectionists. The harsh brutality effectively emphasized Roman domination and acted as a deterrent to any with criminal intent.

This didn't look like power or salvation to first century Corinthians. Some were **Jews**. The cross was a stumbling block, because it was the ultimate sign of disgrace and degradation, God's curse on a victim. A crucified Messiah? Impossible.

Others were **Greeks**, who valued knowledge and wisdom above all else. They could find little to admire or respect in someone succumbing to such an ignominious death. This defied logic. How could any right-minded Greek look up to a crucified victim?

Both Jews and Greeks rejected Paul's preaching of Christ crucified. But human wisdom does not lead to knowledge of God. Just as Isaiah had prophesied, because people were worshipping with their lips not their hearts, worshipping

in appearance and ritual, not turning to the Lord in sincerity and truth, their worship was empty, their wisdom and intelligence only apparent.

Amazingly, God's power to save believers through the death and resurrection of Christ is the salvation of Jews and Greeks and all who God has called. The world's values are upside down. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" Paul tells us.

Jesus's object lesson in cleansing the temple of all that was contra to worship asks us to look beyond the literal sense, as we must do so often in reading scripture. Jesus shows how Temple worship was becoming obsolete. It had been essential, the place God had met with his people. Keeping the law bound ritualistic life together. Sweeping the temple clean, removed corruption and empty ritual to allow knowledge of God's presence with his people embodied in Jesus.

### **3.How will we measure our growth?**

We are all fallible, flawed, sinful human beings who have failed our holy God. We all know that. We don't have to explain or excuse our failures. However, we must all grow in our knowledge of God, a lifelong occupation. He has given us the building blocks to live in obedience, to take up our cross and follow, living totally for him.

One value of a wilderness experience (as Lent can be) is to take stock of where our lives are heading, to renew our focus on God rather than on the world, to check our pride, and replace idolatry with true worship, to acknowledge our shortcomings, our lazy devotions, lack of intentional Bible reading, or unfocussed prayer time. All of these invite us to come to the foot of the cross, seeking forgiveness. God knows and loves each one of us. He receives our confessions; with him there is always forgiveness as our hearts and minds undergo his transformation.

When we come to Lent next year, will we be able to look back to this point in our lives and recognise that through worship, prayer and scripture, we have grown in holiness, right living and knowledge of the Lord our God?

I conclude with George Herbert's contentment prayer:

"Lord Jesus,  
You have given so much to me.  
Give one thing more, a grateful heart. Amen"