

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : February 21st, 2021
“First Sunday of Lent”

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT 2021

“Stressed pupils need a little quiet each day” – so ran the headline of an article I once read. It was suggested that schools should encourage pupils to observe a daily period of quiet reflection to help them cope with stress and the pressure to achieve. The author wrote “a daily period of stillness would improve children’s mental health and help them to combat anxiety and depression. With the decline in religious assemblies, the chance to be quiet during the school day is being lost, at a time when it is needed more than ever as young people experience increasingly frantic pressure in their lives”. I am sure many of you – particularly those who teach – would wholeheartedly agree. But I would want to go one further – and suggest that it is also all adults – stressed or not – who need a little quiet each day – and in these anxious days that we are going through this is probably more important than ever.

A couple of years ago I attended a quiet day for clergy run by some holy Sisters. The speaker spoke about the need for space, for quiet in the midst of our work. She spoke of the two things which we have to offer to God – our time and our desire. She went on to suggest that we might adopt a new Rule of Life, and encouraged us to think through this under three headings: Prayer, Rest, Work – in that order. It is prayer which undergirds everything we do and are, that keeps us in touch with God; then we need to create times for rest and

recreation; and then we will have all we need to do God's work. This is a personal offering to a personal life – the Master Key for our Life; a rule of life which should be a liberation for us all.

She went onto tell this story: *A man died and left three sons. One son decided to go off and do medical work, because he wanted to relieve the suffering of so many needy people which he saw in the world. He was dedicated to this calling and he worked hard for many years. The second son decided to go off and work towards the reconciliation of people, because he wanted to achieve unity amongst many who were disunited. He was dedicated to this calling and he worked hard for many years. The third son decided to stay put, just to be, to do his work and live his life. Eventually, many years later, the three brothers met up. The first son was absolutely exhausted from his medical work, utterly depressed and stressed. The people he cared for never seemed to get better, and the more he worked amongst them, the more demanding they became. The second son was absolutely exhausted from his reconciliation work, utterly depressed and stressed. The people he brought together never seemed to achieve much, and the more he worked amongst them, the more disunited they became. The third son, by contrast, was a picture of health, happiness and calmness. The other two crossly demanded how this could be. The third son took a bucket and filled it with water from a nearby pond. He invited them to look into the bucket – which of course was filled with a brown muddy mess and meant they could see nothing. But as they looked some more, slowly the mud and sediment fell to the bottom of the bucket and, as they waited patiently, the clear water allowed them to see their own reflection as they peered into the bucket. That was the key to the calmness and serenity of the third son. He had realised, very early on, that what he needed to do was to be still, to be quiet, to depend upon the resources of God – and then, through the Almighty, he found he was able to do his life's work, free from exhaustion, stress and anxiety. The first two sons decided on their own what their life's work would be and did it.*

The third son had first asked God what he should do – and it seems that he got the answer.

For us today – what we all need is to be still, to be quiet, to depend upon the resources of God – and then, through the Almighty, we will be able to do our work, free (as far as is possible) from exhaustion, stress and anxiety. We know how busy and frantic and anxious our world is. What an example each one of us could set others if we were seen to be people of calmness, of stillness, of serenity.

There's that wonderful prayer for serenity: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".

The season of Lent is a very appropriate time for each of us to begin to take time, to make time, to create times in our day for stillness and reflection and quiet.

Today we heard the familiar story of Jesus being driven out into the wilderness. You'll note Mark records that all this took place immediately after the Baptism of Jesus by John and immediately before he was to commence his work – his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. It was even before he had called his first disciples. Jesus knew how important it was for him to take time, to make time to be close to his heavenly Father as he went through his temptations and as he prepared himself for his life's work.

Prayer. Rest. Work. Jesus got it right. The third son got it right. So should we.

Heavenly Father, as the Church begins this season of Lent, we ask you to remind us of what is important and what is not; of where we are wandering away and what we need to change; so that by Easter, we will be renewed and strengthened for your service in the world. Amen.