The Second Sunday before Lent
Saints Mary and Peter, Tidenham, Saint Luke, Tutshill, and Saint Michael and All Angels, Tidenham Chase, 2020

Genesis 1:1-2:3
Matthew 6:25-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, friends, we find ourselves staring down the barrel of another Lent. It seems almost impossible that we are only a week-and-a-half away from Ash Wednesday, but here we are. This gives me an opportunity to draw to your attention the fact that there will be services of Holy Communion on Ash Wednesday - Wednesday, 26 February - at 10:15 a.m. at Tidenham, and at 7:30 p.m. at Tutshill. I hope that you will make one of those services a priority if you possibly can. Lent is one of the most formative and powerful times of each year, as we walk again with our Lord towards the cross and the empty tomb.

But before we begin that journey, the church gives us a really special gift each year. These two Sundays before Lent begins, which are known these days by the rather prosaic titles of the Second Sunday before Lent, and the Sunday Next Before Lent, but those who remember and love the Prayer Book will remember and love also the rather more evocative titles of these two Sundays: Sexagesima and Quinquagesima Sundays.

What we are given in our Bible readings on these last two Sundays before we begin another Lent are two nuggets of grace. Two wonderful gifts of revelation, if you like, into the nature of God, and the reality of our world, which are there to give us a bit of a geeing up, a shot of adrenaline in the arm, if you like, before the 40 days begin.

Do remember that Jesus said to his disciples on the first Maundy Thursday evening, ‘I have lots of other things to say to you but you are not ready yet?’ Well this is the same thing going on. The church is saying to us, Lent is coming, it’s going to be tough, you need to dig back down into your prayer life, into your Bible reading, into your thinking about how you are in the face of God, but you’re not ready for that yet. First of all let’s remember some really important things about God. Here are two Sundays of encouragement, two glimpses of holiness, to fuel you up, to strengthen you for your journey.

And so today we are reminded about creation. Next week we are given the gift of the story of Jesus’s transfiguration: a tiny bit more about that the end, but that is really the purview of next week’s preacher!

We are reminded about creation today. That’s why we have the long reading from Genesis. It only crops up twice in the year. We hear it today, on the second Sunday before Lent, and then we hear it again, sometimes, at the Easter Vigil. And you see how this story of creation is there to bookend the Lenten journey, to remind us at the beginning, and again just at the point where were ready to celebrate the resurrection, that there’s something about creation which is extraordinary. Which is amazing.

And we’re not very used to hearing long Bible readings in church anymore. So is actually no bad thing to hear an entire chapter of book of the Bible being read. And what a chapter! The opening verses of the entire Bible. And we hear the rhythms don’t we, every time God creates something new we are reminded that “it was good”. And there was evening, and there
was morning, and then something else is created. This solemn mounting process of God unfolding the heavens and the earth, purposefully, intentionally, and in a way that it is good.

And really, if you only remember one thing from today’s sermon, remember this: goodness is baked into creation. Yes, we are about to enter into the season of Lent when we focus, quite rightly, on our sins, and of the fallenness of humanity, the weakness and cruelty and malice the we are capable of. But that is why we get given the story of creation first. So that we begin the journey remembering that goodness is baked into the world. Goodness is baked into creation. Everything around us was created purposefully, intentionally, is not an accident, it isn’t the result of the haphazard coming together of a ladle full of random chemicals. God said, “let there be light”, and there was light. And God saw the light was good.

The journey of Lent, and actually the journey of each individual Christian person is the journey home. And so we are reminded of that this Sunday. We are on our way home. Our walk, our journey, with all of its triumphs and sorrows, with all of its peaks and troughs, with all of its victory and failure, is the journey home to God. Goodness is baked in. One of the traps that we fall into as Christian people is actually giving the devil too much power. We need to remember, always, that Christ has already won the victory. All we need to do is to hold out a hand to him, and like Peter drowning in the sea of Galilee, he will raise us up to stand with him. The goodness that is baked in the beginning is absolutely indelible.

And just as an extra reminder of that, next Sunday at 2 o’clock at Tidenham there will be a baptism. Beatrix is joining the Christian family, and one of the things of the vicar will say as he marks her forehead with the sign of the cross is this: Beatrix, Christ claims you as his own. Receive the sign of the cross.

Christ claims you. You belong. And each one of us who have been baptised had words similar to that spoken over us. And we had the sign of the cross marked on our foreheads. The sign of belonging. The sign of fellowship. The sign of Christ.

The cross towards which we move, which will dominate our vision, our focus on Good Friday, is above all other things a sign of love. It is a sign that God never reneges, never turns back on his commitment to the world that he created, and that he created to be good.

And our Gospel/2nd reading today is a further reminder of this. Do not worry. All the way through that wonderful reading, the Lucan version of which Emma and I had at our wedding 16 years ago, is that gentle warning against giving either the devil, or indeed ourselves, too much power. Do not worry about your life, about what you will eat or what you will drink, about what you will wear.

Now you and I both know that is easier said than done. And I don’t think what Jesus is saying is be careless. If Genesis chapter 1 teaches us anything it is that creation is precious and needs to be cared for. Jesus is not saying disconnect yourself from the troubles of the world. He is not saying, oh you know what don’t worry, you are God’s crew, you’ll be fine, you’ll go to heaven, so the rest of the world can go hang. He’s absolutely not saying that. What he is saying is, please remember that you are not God. Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well. Effectively, you do your job, and God will do his. And our job is to seek the kingdom. To be attentive to the hints and guesses of the coming of the Kingdom around us. And to be always ready to point away from ourselves and towards the cross. And the God who knows and counts every bird, every flower, he knows and counts every one of us as well.
And there’s something about living in the present as well. That final verse: do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today. I still rather miss the King James version: ‘sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’. Again, not saying stop caring or being concerned, but just saying don’t forget to rest where you are. You know we rush through life, and we don’t notice where we are. And when we do that we stop noticing the people around us. We stop noticing the beauty around us. We become distracted, and uneasy, and we stop giving people the value and the time they deserve. Today’s trouble is enough for today. But you know what, today’s beauty is also sufficient.

Next week we get a wonderful glimpse of the reality of Jesus Christ before we enter Lent. But today’s readings are enough for today! Notice creation. Revel in it. Notice each other. Notice yourself. And remember that goodness is baked in. ‘And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good’. Amen.