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

When Bishop Michael Perham, my ordaining Bishop and onetime Bishop of Gloucester preached what would end up being his final sermon on Ash Wednesday three years ago in the cathedral here in Salisbury, I think he took people by surprise. He was dying. Everybody knew that. His body was pretty broken by that point, an aggressive brain tumour which been diagnosed the previous autumn was doing its worst. I think we were all expecting a sermon about suffering, or about trials. It was, after all, Ash Wednesday. And instead he preached about hope.

If you get the time go on the Cathedral website and read that sermon. It is much better than the one I'm about to preach, so feel free to switch off at this point and explore the index of our lovely new hymn book!

But you see I think Michael gave us, amongst the gifts of his final Lent, and his final sermon, a really important reminder that Lent, this season of which we are now a week-and-a-half into, with 36 or so days left, this season of Lent which we enter into every year before celebrating the great feast of Easter - this is really not a season about suffering. It isn’t a season about trials. It is a season about hope. It is a season of hope.

Indeed the word that we use in the West for this season, ‘Lent’ comes from the word Lento, which means to length, or to draw out, it’s the same word that we use for spring. It’s a word that refers to the lengthening of the days, the coming of the sun, of flowers, bulbs, of hope.

Lent is about hope. Yes, it is a season of penitence, yes it is a season where we focus on the disciplines of the Christian life: prayer, fasting, charitable giving. And all those things are important, and if you are keen on doing a bit of a spiritual stock take during this Lenten season, perhaps thinking again about your life of prayer, or whether practising some fasting might be good for you, do seek out one of the clergy. We would love to talk with you about that.

But we make a profound mistake if we imagine that the purpose of Lent is to make ourselves miserable. It really isn't. Scripture reminds us that Christ came to give us life in all its fullness. Life in all its fullness is not a definition of misery. A wise man once said to me “Tom, God is not interested in your doctrine of self exhaustion!” In other words, to do penance, to practice self-denial for its own sake is not only unhelpful, but it is to miss the point of the season of Lent.

Lent is a season of hope. In this country, as I've already said, Lent coincides with the lengthening of the days, the emergence of daffodils, the warming of the day, the lightening of the evening. That first Sunday where we leave Evensong in the daylight!

And what are we to hope for? Well the readings on the second Sunday of Lent help us out with that. If you will indulge me in a little romp through the first 12 chapters of Genesis, it’s worth remembering that our reading this morning is, if you like, the first chapter of the book, because the first 11 chapters are the
prologue. We’ve heard extracts from those chapters over the past three weeks or so. It’s helpful to think of Genesis as a book with a prologue. The prologue, the first 11 chapters, kind of set the scene if you like. They set up the two main characters: humanity and God. And over and over again we see God being gracious, and humanity squandering that grace. So in chapters 1 and two God creates a lovely world, and in chapter 3 Adam and Eve squander it. In chapter 4 Cain murders Abel, committing the first murder recorded in Scripture. We then hear the unfolding story of the Flood, as God seeks to correct the wayward nature of human sin. Finally, we hear the story of the Tower of Babel, that story which is above all about arrogance. Humanity says, “let us build a tower with its top in the heavens,” let us climb up to where God is and put ourselves in the place where he belongs. And God topples the tower, and scatters arrogant human beings across the world.

And that brings us to Genesis chapter 12, from where our first reading comes today. And do you know what, what strikes me about the beginning of Genesis, which is, let’s face it, a pretty weird collection of myths, stories, sort of pre-history and the like, is just quite how optimistic it really is. Every single time God does something lovely, and we stuff it up, God just finds a way of resetting the relationship. Create a lovely world which you ruin, okay, find a way through. Murder your brother, okay, find a way to protect the murderer even so. Fill the world with sin: okay, give you a lifeboat. Quite literally. A life Ark. Become so arrogant that you forget that you are not God: make yet another promise about how committed you are to your people.

After all the dysfunctional, cackhanded, shortsighted, blinkered arrogance that humanity manage in 11 short chapters of Genesis, where do we end up? “The Lord said to Abram, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

The result of all that we could throw in God’s face is yet more blessing. And really from Genesis 12 until the end of the Old Testament is the story of how that plays out. The story of God, sometimes gently, sometimes let’s be honest rather more assertively, shepherding a confused, recalcitrant, backsliding, easily distracted people back towards his love.

The Old Testament, and actually the whole of Scripture, is basically God’s love letter to his people. God’s love letter to us. And it is above all a letter of hope.

And you know, 10 days into another Lent, I am so grateful that this is the story of God’s love. That it is a story of hope. Because yes the people of Israel were confused, recalcitrant, backsliding and easily distracted. And you know what, so am I. My Christian journey is hallmarked with failure, or lacklustre attempts to be a better person. It’s hallmarked, too, by taking shortcuts when I think no one is looking, and being more concerned with how my Christian life appears to you than how it really is. Our story, my story, is the story of God and his people.

And that is why Lent is so important. Not because of the disciplines, the abstinence, the giving up of things. Because those things, on their own, are just more ways to impose disciplines of life upon ourselves which we will obsess about, lie about, or worry about. No, the Lenten disciplines, whether it is in the way in which we pare back our worship during this time: no Gloria, no hymns with the A-word in them, or whether it is about those personal disciplines of reading more, fasting a bit, trying to rediscover our life of prayer - all those things are a response to the fact that we have hope. And we have hope
because God loves us. Sorry if that sounds flipping obvious, but it’s worth saying.

We respond to God because we have hope. And we hope because God loves us.

What do you need to do to be close to God, asks Nicodemus as he sneaks a meeting with Jesus in the dead of the night? Jesus doesn’t say do penance. He doesn’t say read this book. It doesn’t say pray more. He says, you need to be born from above. Or as it was more usually translated in the middle of the last century, you must be born again. You need a new beginning, where what matters is that you know that God loves you, and everything else flows from that.

And Jesus reminds Nicodemus of Moses holding up the serpent on the pole in the desert. The symbol that has universally become the symbol of doctors: of healing. And then he gives us probably the most well-known and oft quoted line in John’s Gospel: God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

Michael Perham, as insomuch, was bang on the money: Lent is about hope. Our diocesan vision is called “renewing Hope”. Renew your hope this Lent. Yes, do the reading, the praying, the giving, the fasting. But do them because you are a person of hope, who has seen the sign of healing lifted up as the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and recognises that all this is possible because God so loved the world.

Amen.