

A sermon at preached St Andrew's Soham by the Rev'd Eleanor Whalley on the 1st Sunday of Lent 2019.

Deut. 26: 1-13; Lk 4: 1-11

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of you who were here last week might be wondering what I got up to on my week off.

The answer to that is that I did a number of things,

but the most important thing I did was go to a confirmation service last Sunday.

That was the reason I took that Sunday off – and the week before it.

The service was at St Andrew's Church, Chesterton,

the church I was part of before I went as a curate to St Neots.

It was important to me to be at the service

because amongst those getting confirmed

were two young friends of mine – also, coincidentally, friends of Cecily –

two 15-year-old girls, Claire and Florrie.

Claire and Florrie have been friends of one another,

and friends of mine, since they were both very little.

Claire in particular has loyally endured all the services I've had on the way to becoming a vicar.

She came to my licensing service here and sat on her own over there,

just where Jamie's sitting.

I thought it was about time I went to something of hers.

Also being confirmed

were two other young people I knew,

and three adults I'd not met before.

On the back page of the service sheet – this is it -

there are short testimonies written by each of them

explaining why were choosing to get confirmed.

I'm going to read you two of them.

This one is Claire's:

'This year, I have been so grateful for the guidance from God through others who are close to me, and through the Holy Spirit's influence. I feel it's important to affirm my relationship with God alongside the people who have supported me through my journey of faith'.

I have to say that when I read that,

and when I thought back to the little girl who used to sit on my knee
and drape herself all over me
in the umpteen church services and eventss you get dragged along to when you're a vicar's daughter, as she is,
I found it very moving.

Here she was, now 15,
able to articulate a faith she'd been baptised into as a baby,
and which had become her own.
She's moved from being an observer –
someone one there because she had to be –
to being someone there because she wants to be.
She's chosen to join in, actively;
She's found her own voice,
She's happy to stand up and be counted -
counted alongside others
whom she acknowledges have played a part in her journey of faith.
It was a wonderful thing to see.

The second testimony is Joan's.
I'd not met Joan before – she arrived after I left.
Joan is 85, and her lungs aren't what they used to be.
She sat in a wheel-chair during the service.
There was an oxygen cylinder strapped to the back of it.
She had tubes running under her nose.
This is what she wrote:

'I want to be confirmed because I was going to be confirmed 70 years ago, when I was 15, but because my friend didn't go along, I didn't, and I've regretted it ever since. Today is about finishing something off. I will finally become a full member of the Church of God... I have been sitting on the side-lines for too long.'

Now the decision to be baptised or confirmed is a very personal thing –
it's a decision we each make – or don't make - in our own time.
If you've read today's notice sheet, you'll've seen that amongst our number here
we already have one candidate for this year's confirmation service.
That is Nicholas who comes with here with his fiancée Antonella.

He's very tall, she's not so tall.

They're getting married here this July.

Nicholas will be confirmed in Ely Cathedral on Easter Eve.

It would be great if some of us were able to be there to support him.

What I'd like all of us to do today

is to think about those testimonies.

What was going on for Claire and for Joan?

Did anything strike us in what they wrote?

And does that have anything to say to us as we begin this season of Lent?

What struck me was that balance

between being with others –

being a part of things,

'becoming a full-member of the Church of God', as Joan put it,

and stepping out on your own.

It was because she hadn't dared step out on her own

that Joan had waited 70 years to get confirmed:

in 1944, her friend 'didn't go along', so nor did she.

Today's readings, I think, hold together that tension

between being alone and being together.

In Deuteronomy, the then present community recalls the experience of past generations –

'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor' –

the community is remembering Abraham.

Abraham is the 'wandering Aramean'

The people God is speaking to are called to remember that Abraham was their ancestor.

They are part of the community of faith that started with Abraham and now includes them.

They are connected to Abraham, and to all the generations that are between him and them.

Together with those who have gone before, they are one people, one community of faith.

Luke, in the passage John read to us,

is the only Gospel writer to put the story of Jesus' temptations

immediately after the list of Jesus' ancestors.

Matthew has a list too, but it comes earlier in his Gospel.

This is what Luke writes in the paragraph just before his temptation story:

‘Jesus was the son (as was thought) of Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi’...

and so it goes on until we get to the punchline:

‘son of Adam, son of God’.

Because of where Luke puts the temptation story,

I think he hints at another temptation – a temptation we don’t often think about.

I think there’s a fourth temptation that gnaws at Christ’s mind and heart.

The devil says:

‘If you are the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread’.

‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple’

‘If you are the son of God’

harks back to that punchline - ‘son of Adam, son of God’.

It harks back to the list of ancestors.

Are you really who you think you are?

I think that’s a real temptation:

the temptation to question who we are –

question our identity as sons and daughters of God.

Our fundamental identity as Christians

lies in our identity as children of God,

members of God’s people – God’s Church.

That is the identity given to us as baptism.

It’s the identity we affirm at confirmation.

In both a baptism and a confirmation service, there’s an affirmation of faith.

We sign up to what we believe.

We affirm who God is, and as we affirm who God is,

we also affirm who we are:

‘This is our Faith... ‘We are members together of the body of Christ’.

As members together

we are each of us called to our own individual relationship with God.

We're called to respond to God in our own way, and in our own time –
or, more to the point, in God's own time.

Lent offers opportunities:

opportunities to be together;

opportunities to join with others –

in this church, that's what our Lent Lunches and Lent Groups are about.

Lent also offers opportunities to step aside.

Those opportunities might come, I hope, in church services.

They might come at home.

Occasions when we make time,

even if only for a couple of minutes a day.

I've said this before: maybe it means locking ourselves in the loo.

Maybe it means sitting in a particular place –

I sit in a particular corner of one of my sofas.

Maybe it's driving home from work, sitting on the train.

As someone said to me the other day, maybe it's standing in the shower.

But wherever it is,

it's finding time to be still;

time to remember who we are.

Who we are really –

individually and together –

sons and daughters of God.

I pray that this Lent we each find that time.

Amen.