

## Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### First Sunday of Lent

#### Readings:

**1 Peter 3: 18-22**

**Mark 1: 9-15**

I'll be honest, it's really hard to know where to begin today. We're in the season of Lent, again. We're beginning a Stewardship Campaign, which obviously I need to say something about. We're living in a world which feels more than just a little apocalyptic, with stories of war, destruction, poverty, and all the rest of it blazoned across our television screens.

And then we come here, and the Gospel reading we have presented to us this morning is one of beginning. The story of Jesus' baptism. From the beginning of his ministry. From the early days, before there was any mention of turning towards Jerusalem and the cross which was to come in another three years, or so, time.

But actually, this is a reading which holds within it everything that we need to hear in relation to all that is going on. It's a story of hope, a story of beginnings, a story of recognising the Son of God living in our midst. Yes, perhaps it does belong better in the season of Epiphany, and yes, that is when the baptism of Christ is celebrated. But the season of Lent is in itself a summary of the whole growth of God's people through the ministry of Jesus Christ, and so to begin it with the story of his baptism is certainly not wrong.

But, as I say, today is also the beginning of a season of stewardship in this benefice. Our PCCs have thought carefully, have recognised that we have a number of great successes in our churches at the moment, but have also realised that to maintain the momentum, and to build on what we are currently doing, there are some things which have to change.

And so, in both our churches, the PCCs have decided to use this time of Lent to consider our stewardship. Members of both PCCs have spent time together thinking about what this actually means, what we need to do differently, what extra we need to keep doing what we do, and to move forwards, and in short, the summary of their discussions is what you have in the leaflet you've been given as you came into church this morning.

Hopefully, in many ways, it is very clear what is meant by stewardship. After all, there is one side of the leaflet given over to just that. But, on the inside of the leaflet, there is more detail, and stewardship is broken down into three sections, financial, worship, and our churches.

All of these are worth us thinking about. Financial stewardship is important because let's be honest, without money, we cannot do very much. Whether we like it or not, we have bills to pay, and whether we like it or not, that isn't easy. I know only too well that people think of the Church of England as being a phenomenally wealthy organisation, but the reality is that the parish churches of our land receive no income other than that which we give, week by week and month by month, as well as the fees generated through the weddings and funerals which we have here.

The stewardship of our worship is equally important, because without those of you who support our worship to take place, it couldn't continue as it does. Again, I know you might tell me that I'm the vicar, and so I'm responsible for making worship happen, and that's the end of it. But the reality is that it's not all about me, and that through those of you who are involved in worship, we are a worshipping community, a church, not just a vicar and a nice group of people. But there is always a need for more, and in the leaflet there are a number of elements of leading worship which people do, and do well, but there are not enough people doing them.

And then there is the stewardship of our churches. Our churches don't run themselves. Our mission and ministry doesn't run itself. Wonderful as our pantomime has been, it hasn't happened without a lot of hard work. Wonderful as our programme of Sunday @ 4 concerts are, they don't happen without a lot of hard work. Wonderful as our coffee mornings are, how many people does it take to make them all that they are? And that's before we get onto the teddy bears' picnics, quiz nights, fayres, and everything else which we do in both churches – but notice that in both churches, these things are so often put together and managed by the same people.

There is a wonderful story of a beautiful church with a lot of wonderful things going on in it, and outside the church there is a single grave – on which is written the words – here lies the indispensable man.

We will all not be here one day, and so none of us can afford to be indispensable. And in truth, none of us are, but unless enough people help those who do so much, then those who do the most can begin to feel indispensable.

So, stewardship is about taking responsibility. It is about enabling our churches to grow, because we are prepared to work at it together. It's about financing our churches properly, and sharing the workload to help us to serve our communities for many years to come.

In short, it is about meeting Jesus today at his baptism. Beginning again, being ready to face the world, and being willing to do that with open hearts and minds to show the love of God, to live in faith, hope and love, and to draw our communities into that calling.

I am also delighted that the groups who have been looking at Stewardship have recognised that there are really good stories to share, and so you will be delighted that preaching will be short and to the point through this Lent, so that we can make space for others to come and share stories of their journey, their involvement, their enthusiasm, and through the real life stories of our friends in the church, we can be inspired to take the next steps.

We don't have all of these people lined up yet, and if you have a story to tell, if your faith and your stewardship can inspire others, please come and see me, and together we can make sure that you are all heard, and that we can learn from each other.

That's all I want to say today, but to finish this introduction to Stewardship, I would ask you please to take the leaflet and read it, to try to be in church this Lent, and hear the messages, to consider your part in our church, to complete the return slip on the back of the leaflet, and most of all, to come on the journey, as Jesus did from his baptism to his resurrection, and to live anew in faith, hope and love.