Sunday next before Lent: 2 Kings 2: 1-12; 2 Corinthians 4: 3-6; Mark 9: 2-9

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

It is unlikely to have escaped your notice that this coming week marks the beginning of the season of Lent. And it will also not have escaped your notice that Ash Wednesday is also St Valentine’s Day.

St Valentine, those who know will tell us, was martyred apparently on February 14th sometime in the third century AD – although actually there seem to be a multitude of Saints Valentine, one of whom is actually a woman, so you can celebrate St Valentine’s Day on February 14th, or November 3rd, on January 7th or on July 6th, 25th or 30th. Take your pick…….

As we know, Valentine is the patron saint of love, lovers, engaged couples, happy marriage…… but less well-known is that he or she is also patron saint of bee keepers, epilepsy, fainting, plague, travellers and young people. That seems to cover pretty well everyone.

So much for Valentine………..perhaps more later.

And so to Lent: I have found myself exercised over the past couple of weeks with the whole business of giving things up and taking things on. Either or both. But what? And then, listening to some clerical friends chatting earlier this week, it occurred to me that it feels wrong to be focusing on that as an end in itself; a discipline. As if we can make God love us more if we work at subsuming our urges to eat or drink things we don’t need. Or we can demonstrate that we love God more than other people do by the same means…….

What these Lenten fasts or additions are actually meant to do is to help us to deepen our life with God – to grow our discipleship, to increase our faithfulness and so on.

(I will, naturally, flag up the Lent Course at this juncture: looking at the St Peter’s Rule of Life has to be a good thing, and doing it alongside others, in community, is surely going to help us all to deepen our relationship with God. Wednesdays, starting next week, 21st February, at 8pm in the Belli Centre – bring anyone you would like to).

But, yes, deepening our life in and with God: in recent years, I have noticed a trend among bishops of the Church of England to go on well-publicised pilgrimages, often to coincide with at least part of Lent. And these pilgrimages must surely disrupt their whole lives and ways of working – they are out and about, meeting new people, visiting new places – and yes, to some extent that is what bishops do, but to try to do that and give up biscuits, when we all know that more tea vicar – or bishop – also means ‘have another biscuit’ too must be very hard.

But at the same time, having normal patterns disrupted is maybe how we ought to try to think about Lent: if we give everything a bit of a shake-up, we might stand at least half a chance of encountering God in ways we hadn’t previously.

And thinking about disruption, there was the elderly priest – a friend of a friend, rather than someone I know personally - who, asked what he was doing for Lent, talked about getting a new guide dog. As one who worked as Personal Reader to a sight-impaired teacher of Modern Foreign Languages for a couple of years while my boys were small, I could appreciate that the whole focus of his next few weeks was going to be building a working partnership with the new dog, moulding it to his ways, embedding the training that had started when the dog was a puppy. But he talked about it in terms of it being a mirror image of what he would be seeking to do in his life with God: setting new timetables and new practices etc, spending time together both at work and at leisure.

I seem to be talking a lot about priests I have known or been acquainted with – sorry, but there is one more story too: it is a fairly common trait among public Christians to beat themselves up about not being somehow worthy to be in the public eye as one who, dangerously, somehow stands as a representative of God. And that’s not a Uriah Heap ever so ‘umble not-worthiness; it is a genuine frustration and fear that, speaking only for myself here, it is so hard sometimes to recapture that sense of closeness with God that I had when I was not a working priest….. Anyway, this particularly priest’s Spiritual Director gave him a task that he thought might help. And that task was to find and name, every evening, three things for which God was grateful to him. And it was an incredibly difficult thing to do – why would God be grateful to him, a sinner? But actually it was also, for him, an incredibly fruitful thing to do.

For those who know anything about systems theory, apparently if you want to disrupt a system, you do it by changing who you’re talking to, and what you’re talking about. And possibly the best thing about that task was that it was such an about-face, such a disruption of normality, that it became oddly compelling. While it is hard to give chocolate up, and takes a real effort of will to do more Bible study or other reading – they might be worthy, and good habits to get into, but this thing was so off-the-wall that he couldn’t not have a go, as it were.

So it seems that whatever disruption is needed in our lives to teach us how to go deeper into relationship with God, that disruption shouldn’t be going against the grain just for the sake of it; it needs to be constructive disruption. And furthermore, it needs to be attractive constructive disruption. I think considering what God might be grateful to you for is as good a place as any to start.

And finally just a footnote on Valentine’s Day, since I promised: it strikes me that while Valentine’s Day is a day for making our love for another human being a public celebration, we treat our love for God a bit as we might treat an affair. Not that I have any personal experience of that, but the bit about skulking around in dark corners, as the couple in the car park did the other evening. We keep it hidden, don’t talk about it, we feel guilty if anyone stumbles on the knowledge that we have a relationship with God.

So then: if we are going to find ways of disrupting our lives this Lent, what are the disruptive ways in which we can also be a bit more public about the fact that we are Christians? That, it seems to me, goes hand in hand with disruptive ways of making that relationship stronger.

**Amen**