



The picture I have given you is of the newly restored doom over the chancel of St Thomas' Salisbury. Christ is seated in judgement to the left is the city of heaven where the blessed are sent; to the right the city of hell awaiting sinners, including a bishop! Doom paintings were fashionable in 15th century to remind people of the eternal consequences of their behaviour. Speaking on Radio 4, the vicar said people tend to see this as a threat and concentrate on hell and bad behaviour but actually the picture is balanced by heaven. Same has happened with that word "doom" – associate with gloom disaster but actually means judgement or accountability.

Which brings us to the start of Lent with its concentration on the confession of sin Shrove Tuesday and reminder of mortality with the ash cross of Ash Wednesday. We enter these 6 weeks aware of our sins and excesses of consumption and reflect on how we may walk closer with Christ. But like the doom, sadly we often turn this necessary accountability into wallowing in our failings. We get stuck in the negative, mourning the past. How often do we remember some past failing but do not recall the 100's of good things we have done. Just as we remember the one unpleasant remark or tweet someone makes and ignore the 10 nice things that are said.

And we apply this negativity to God. Reminded of true story of child made to stand in the corridor for talking in class. When the headmistress passed and asked why, she remarked. "Well I forgive you, but Jesus won't". What a strange view that God is less kind than we are! How about singing about the wrath of God as in popular modern hymn. Would you like people to talk about *your* wrath? Surely it's the love of God we celebrate!

Danger is that Lent goes into this black hole of negativity. We know we need more self-awareness if we are to grow as followers of Jesus, to consume less but humiliation is not necessary. God calls us to be his children as we are, as he made us, warts and all, not automata, robots designed to do it all right. The instinct

of Christian and Muslim craftsmen in the middle ages was right: when they incorporated tiny errors in a great cathedral (Lincoln Imp) or a Persian rug as a reminder that nothing and no-one is perfect except God. When a group of calligraphers set out to hand write the whole illustrated bible (the Saint John's Bible) in 2000, a project that took 10 years and is truly amazing, they were asked, 'Why bother when a computer can do it perfectly in no time? That's the point. Computer generated calligraphy is flawless but not human. Our work is imperfect. But we invest a great deal of ourselves in each word because we want each sentence to live and connect with people.'

So Lent has begun. Whether it's a time for you to give up or to take up, whatever spiritual fitness regime you choose, may it be a time to reflect on yourself and your walk with Jesus; a time of accountability, not being threatened with doom or walking in humiliation.

So to help us be a bit more disciplined so that we may have life in all its fullness (nothing negative there), the tone of worship changes. Gone are the wonderful hymns at Ashley's' baptism last week, colours are muted, the flowers gone, the alleluias dropped. But the light of God which we sang about 'Shine Jesus' is still there. Just as on the darkest of this depressing winter's days, the sun is still shining, still keeping us going, warm and growing – just can't see it. Think of that tomorrow when our Bible notes turn us to the first day of Creation –Let there be Light- and remember when you turn on a light or see the sun, God's creative energy, his love always there.

God is still there, God with us even in Lent when we realise our imperfections, even when we approach the end of life, the God of Love who knows us, cares for us, wants the best for us, wants us to grow. The God who in the Doom picture is seated as the judge bears the wounds of his love for us in his outstretched hands. Dying for us that we might live for ever.

A great deal of thought goes into the choice of music and today at the end of the service the choir will sing a very beautiful anthem 'View me, O Lord, a work of thine'. The words were written by Thomas Campion a man who suffered a lot, the death of both parents when a child, failure in his studies and careers who ultimately became a doctor and died probably of the plague in 1620 just as many health workers are doing in the corona virus epidemic today. Yet these words speak of the light of God dwelling in him, that the God who made him will never let him go and ends triumphantly;

In thy word, Lord, is my trust,
To thy mercies fast I fly;
Though I am but clay and dust
Yet thy grace can lift me high.

May that message of hope sustain us through our Lenten journey.
Amen