

Mar 25 Lenten Mid-Week Message

Social distancing may have been more common a practice in early Christianity than we thought. Its purpose back then was more of a safeguard to promote ones spirituality through fasting and prayer. So there are fewer distractions when you are not around others. Today the purpose of self- distancing is to protect one's health and well- being and to halt the spread of the virus. Mind you the reasons for self-distancing among the early Christians could still be useful during this Lent.

During the course of Our Lord's ministry, He would often go off into a deserted area to pray and be away from the crowds. Most often He did this so that He could pray quietly and undisturbed and to be with the Father. Mathew's gospel records two such events, Mat 12:15 "But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there". Mat 14:13, "When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. This was a common practice for Jesus to socially-distance Himself from the crowds that were seeking Him. Remember that Our Lord started His ministry amongst us after His forty day fast in the desert.

This form of self-distancing for the sake of spiritual growth would catch on in early Christianity. Many serious Christian men and women go out into the deserts of Syria and Egypt. They would use these passages from Mathew as their inspirations. They left everything to take up their crosses and follow Jesus into the desert. It is hard to imagine that two simple verses would inspire so many. That is a testimony to the power of the word.

Many would carve out caves for themselves in the desert to live in. In these caves they would dedicate their lives to prayer and fasting. Over time like minded Christians would seek these hermits out. They would do this for guidance, support and inspiration. Many seekers would stay and communities would form and grow up in the deserts. These communities were based on solitude, prayer and fasting. Today we call them monasteries. We know most of this from the writing of the lives of the saints. These Christians recorded their temptations and struggles as they followed Jesus into the desert.

There is a tradition in the Sinai monasteries during Lent and it is still practiced today. That on the first Sunday of Lent the monastery gates are opened and the monks and nuns wandered the desert until Palm Sunday. They would take enough bread for their six week stay in the desert. During that time they would avoid one another so that they would have no distractions while they prayed and fasted. That is serious self-distancing for spiritual growth.

So self-distancing is not a new concept in Christianity. Early Christians practiced it for spiritual growth and to imitate Our Lord, who prayed and fasted in the desert for forty days.

Today we do self-distancing for our health and wellbeing and that of our loved ones and neighbours. Yet we could use this time of self-distancing to pray and fast more. It seems like our homes have become self-contained deserts this Lent. Like the monks and nuns who are wondering in the Sinai by themselves, we too have communities to go to. During these times it is very important to keep connected to family and friends. We can do this by phone, e-mail, skype and zoom. How we keep connected has changed only for awhile. This too is church.

Sunday's messages are: The world we live in, and the last sermon in our series on forgiveness. These topics are not related. God Bless and stay safe, Pastor D