

Septuagesima
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Amos 2:4-16
Ephesians 4:17-32

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Though it doesn't appear anywhere on our notice sheet today, those of us who have lived and worshipped with the Prayer Book for many years know that today is the Sunday called Septuagesima. Because of progress during the 1960s and 70s, the rather evocative and beautiful Western titles for these three Sundays leading us up to Lent have been rather suppressed, but if you look in your Book of Common Prayer you will find that the collect and readings today and the next two weeks are found under these beautiful and mysterious titles: Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima. And what we note about those titles is of course that we are counting down. They are stylistic rather than numerically accurate, because we don't have ten-day weeks, but they were so named in order to draw attention to the faithful that we have stopped measuring our time by Christmas, and we have started measuring our time by the Passion. The ancient title for Lent was Quadragesima, literally '40 days', and so the Sundays leading up to the beginning of Lent were given these Latin titles, 50, 60 and, 70 days, really just to remind us that our focus, our orientation, has shifted from the crib to the cross. Good Friday is not actually 70 days away, it is in fact 61 days away, but the focus of our worship has shifted, and those ancient titles were put there in order to help us to shift into that mindset. As I say, progress intervened, and we are now left with the rather less romantic and rather more utilitarian 'Third

Sunday before Lent', about which I don't expect anyone will write poetry. But the point is still made.

We are to be ready for Good Friday. We are to be ready for Easter. And so we are gifted time to do our preparing. And actually Holy Mother Church knows that even with the six weeks of Lent, we are not going to get ourselves sorted, so in her generosity we get given these 2 ½ extra weeks to get into gear. This season of Septuagesima was probably instituted by Gregory the Great, and certainly since the sixth century it has been in our calendar. 2 ½ weeks to get ready for the 40 days, so that, if you like, we can hit the ground running.

Why might that be important? Well because it is about *justice*, and it is about *light*. We heard in our first lesson Amos's voice crying out for justice. "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for sandals." And in our second lesson was the voice of the light: "Put away all bitterness and wrangling, and be kind to one another. You must no longer live as the Gentiles live...they are darkened in their understanding."

Brother and sisters, we have a race ahead of us. It is a great task to which we are called. As Thomas Attwood knew as he chose to set those words: "Teach me O Lord the way of thy statutes and I shall keep them"...how long? For a week? A month. No, "to the end." This is a marathon, not a spring. So we enter into the gift of these three weeks before Lent. What do I need to work on this year? To keep a good Lent? To approach Easter with justice and light? John Betjeman wrote:

Septuagesima – seventy days
To Easter's primrose tide of praise;
The Gesimas – Septua, Sexa, Quinc

Mean Lent is near, which makes you think.
Septuagesima – when we're told
To “run the race”, to “keep our hold”,
Ignore injustice, not give in, and practise stern self-
discipline;
A somewhat unattractive time
Which hardly lends itself to rhyme.