

Have you ever watched the film 'Ice Cold in Alex'? John Mills plays an officer called Captain Anson who is leading an army unit escaping from Tobruk in an old army ambulance. As they drive across the North African desert they face a lot of challenges, but he keeps thinking about the ice cold glass of lager that awaits him when they finally get to Alexandria. There's a great scene when they arrive at the bar at last and the barman pours the four lagers and John Mills downs his glass of Carlsberg. 'Worth waiting for' he says.

I wonder what would be your 'ice cold in Alex?' What do you look forward to like that? What really makes your mouth water? That's probably a bit of an unfair question at this point in Lent - to be honest it was a bit of a torment for me watching the clip from the film again.

It wasn't just the taste of the ice cold lager for Captain Anson - it was everything that it meant - getting out of the desert - reaching safety with his comrades - a moment of true satisfaction. The things we hunger for and thirst for are often about more than just the obvious.

Sometimes those things are positive and sometimes less so. The glass of wine or the bottle of beer that says 'the weekend starts here' may be a reward for a hard week's work. But perhaps the chocolate biscuit in the middle of the afternoon is a little an act of rebellion when we feel

under pressure - and the tub of ice cream in our laps may be about our need for comfort because life is pretty awful.

What about the other things we look forward to or long for? That programme we love watching... Maybe it's partly just the excuse to sit down. Maybe we feel better when we see a show with a real heart like 'Call the midwife' - or when we see one of the many flawed but deeply moral detectives putting the world to rights.

Getting in touch with our longings - and seeing what lies behind our cravings and desires - can be very helpful in understanding what is going on inside us and in our lives. Do we feel the need to escape - do we hunger for some sort of comfort - are we deeply exhausted, or bored with our lives - what buttons is it that all those adverts press in us?

And our Old Testament readings today ask a further question. Might it be that all our longings and desires in the end point to something deeper and more fundamental - our longing for God, and for what God can give to us? 'You have made us for yourself,' says St. Augustine, 'and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'. Julian says 'The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God, knowing that that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need.'

Is there something in us which senses the truth of that? Do we ever feel the same as today's psalm? 'O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.'

Sometimes, I do feel that. Sometimes I look forward to a retreat, or a quiet day, or just a few minutes quiet in morning prayer, and I feel that thirst for God. And actually I think it is there somewhere in me, deep down, all the time.

But it gets covered over. Something stops me accessing it. I look for short term satisfaction and shallow comfort - the excitement of Bargain Hunt, or badminton, or beer. Isaiah asks a question which could be asked of each of us, and of the whole culture we live in; 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?'

Why do we sometimes use our time and our energy and money seeking satisfaction in things which do not really satisfy us - which leave us feeling empty like fast food? Why don't we spend more time testing out this possibility that what God has for us is much more richly fulfilling?

Maybe it's because it is demanding. I'm not talking about giving to the church - although we will be hearing about

Church Support Sunday later. But there seems to be something about reorienting ourselves towards God which is hard.

Isaiah says two things. On the one hand, he says that God offers us his good gifts freely, like a market seller who asks for no money: 'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price!' God opens his hands and puts before us the treasures of his love and grace, if we will only believe it.

But later in the reading we discover that there is a different sort of cost: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near, let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts, let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon'.

Turning back to God means seeing the truth about ourselves and our lives - something that we often spend quite a lot of effort avoiding. Why am I so busy? Well, there's a lot to do, and not much time, and so many people's demands, and it's just the way it is... No, why am I really so busy? What won't I let go of? Is this the way God wants it to be? We all have our blind spots.

If we are going to turn back to God we need to be sure that he is going to look on us with forgiveness and love - we need to trust these words of Isaiah. And we need to be ready to change. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, not are your ways my ways, says the Lord.' God wants to give us good things, but we may only be able to receive them if we let go of the things we are holding so tightly. God wants to set us free - but we may fear that freedom. God wants to lead us on the way of life - but sometimes we prefer the comforts we know on the path of half-life.

I played a song to those who were with us on Thursday morning, and it included these words; 'But if you're drifting away, if it's falling apart... just let yourself be quietly drawn by the stronger call of what you really love.' These weeks in Lent are our annual opportunity to get back in touch with what we really love - to dig a little and discover the very deepest desires in our souls, and to reorient ourselves a little, so that we can receive more of all that God wants to give us. Because although we may be a little reluctant, and a little unsure, God never holds back - he has so much more that he wants to give to each of us.

Yesterday was the day we remember George Herbert, the priest and poet. He wrote a famous poem about God's love - about our Lord inviting us to eat at his table. At college once I wrote a prayer based on the poem for a communion service. Sarah kindly had it written out for me when I was

ordained, and it hangs on my study wall - a little faded now.

It reminds us of God's longing for us - a longing that we will accept his invitation, and come - come to this meal, come to the feast he wants to lay before us each day, come and know more and more of the riches of his grace. he calls us - how will we respond?

The Lord Jesus invites us to His meal.
When our shame makes us draw back,
his love bids us welcome.
he lifts our downcast eyes to his.
He takes our hand and draws us in.
He says, 'because of me, you are the worthy guest.'
Our Lord, we come with thankful hearts.