

Ash Wednesday 6 March 2019 Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne at the 8pm Sung Eucharist at St Mary's Barnes

Today, Ash Wednesday, we mark the beginning of the season of Lent. Traditionally in the life of the Church since ancient times Lent has been the penitential season to prepare the faithful for the liturgical drama of Holy Week and the great feast of Easter. From very early on it was customary for Christians to prepare for observing with great devotion the time of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection by a season of penitence and fasting. At first Lent was observed by those who were preparing for baptism at Easter, and also by those penitents who were to be restored to the Church's fellowship from which they had been separated by sin. Over time the Church came to realise that a spiritually disciplined keeping of these forty days before Easter would benefit all Christians alike.

In Lent we consider ways in which we can come closer to Jesus in his journey to the cross. Perhaps tonight we have come here with some firm resolutions as to what we might do this Lent. All too often perhaps we think of Lent in terms of giving something up – such as chocolate or alcohol, or speeding while we are driving. This is all very well. But it might also be helpful to think in terms of taking something on. In other words, let's not just think negatively, about what we might not do, but rather positively, about what might be a good thing to take on. Such as more time to pray? Or reading a spiritual book? Or being determined to be kind to someone we find difficult? One obvious method is to spend more time in reading the scriptures, perhaps the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, ministry and passion. It was a method Jesus so often used himself concerning the Old Testament scriptures that he knew so well.

In today's gospel reading from Matthew (Matthew 6.1-6,16-21) taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching his disciples about spiritual discipline. He warns against practising their religion in order to be seen by others. He speaks here of three spiritual practices in particular: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Notice he does not say "if" you give alms, pray or fast, but "whenever" you give alms, or pray or fast. He regards all three as core spiritual disciplines, and not as optional extras. And in all three disciplines he draws attention to motive. In our spiritual practice, whatever it may be, we should not be seeking the attention of others and their admiration, we should be seeking God alone. Otherwise our devotional exercises are worthless. In our reading from the Old Testament today (Isaiah 58.1-12) the prophet Isaiah makes a similar point. Isaiah shows up the hypocrisy of those who worship God while at the same time fail to act with integrity and justice:

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,.....to let the oppressed go free,..... to share your bread with the hungry....".

Our own reflecting on and praying such scriptures can be a very effective way of enabling us to put their teaching into practice and keep us connected with the love of God – especially when we read and listen to the scriptures with an attentiveness that in our normal busy daily routine may elude us.

But of course Lent is not just about keeping outward disciplines or practice, such as fasting or giving to the Church and charitable causes. Lent is perhaps more importantly about the inner disciplines of the Spirit – about humility and integrity and true repentance - about actually living what we say we believe. These inner spiritual disciplines are often less obvious and less easily recognised. We know if we have just eaten a chocolate. We do not necessarily know if our attitude has been authentically humble or loving in a particular situation. Often with hindsight we see more clearly. We may be convinced we are in the right about something. But there always remains the possibility that we may be misguided. Only God has the complete perspective on our life. Pride tends to want

everything to be black and white. Humility tends to live more easily with the uneasy tension that we may not have all the answers to a given situation.

Whatever our resolutions this Lent, let us be mindful that such resolutions carry within them a potential snag – the snag that we might be tempted to think that Lent is really all about good works – about doing the right thing, preferably in such a way that other people notice! But Lent is essentially an inner discipline rather than an outer one, about drawing closer to God in love and holiness of life.

I wonder how many of us have seen the film “Chocolat” that came out some years ago? It’s about a single mother who sets up a chocolate shop in a village in France. She does not go to church, which does not go down well with the local Mayor and some other villagers. What particularly annoys some of the locals is that in Lent she is selling these delicious chocolates just at the time of year when many of the church-going faithful have resolved to go without them. Rather like Jesus himself, she divides people – some are drawn to her warm, generous nature, others repelled by her apparent disregard for Church practice. But as the film progresses, it becomes clear that she is the really loving character set amongst these suspicious villagers. Gradually she draws people together and after a crisis, the whole village celebrates with her on Easter Day. It’s a film that highlights Jesus’ own teaching in our gospel for today – that spiritual practice is worthless if undertaken without love and compassion for others, and that our real focus needs to be on God, rather than on what God might give us.

In Lent it is right that we spiritually exercise ourselves and repent of our waywardness. But let’s not get bogged down by it all. I would like to close with a story about a monk. The monk held between his outstretched arms a piece of string. He said to a child,

“This is like my relationship with God. I am one end of the string, and God is the other end. Now”, the monk continued, “ I want you to think of all the things you have done wrong over the last week. Every time that you think of something you have done wrong and then been sorry about, I want you to cut the string and then tie a knot in it”.

The monk handed the child a pair of scissors and held out the string between his outstretched arms. The child became thoughtful for a few moments, frowned – then cut the string and tied it with a knot. This happened three or four times. Then the monk, still holding the string with outstretched hands, asked the child,

“Now, what do you notice about the two ends of string?”

The child looked puzzled for a moment, and then his eyes lit up.

“Oh”, he replied, “they are closer together”.