

## Ash Wednesday evening service

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6 :1-6, 16-21



## Rebalance and Refresh

Today is Ash Wednesday ... so today's reading can bring a smile to my face. Jesus is saying beware of practising piety in public. In other words, beware of doing stuff-whether it be praying, fasting or any other religious act-where it can be seen by others. And what are we doing? Sitting in church about to be given the opportunity to have the mark of the cross in ashes placed on our forehead as a sign of our beginning Lent.

Looking closely, we spot that Jesus says beware of doing things to be seen by others because it is possible that being seen by others is our motivation and if so, then we will get our reaction/ reward from them. If instead we have God as our focus for what we do, our keeping of Lent goes beyond simply doing stuff. Hence the need to ask what are we doing when we keep Lent?

In the book of Isaiah, chapter 58, the prophet is railing against the people who are performing their religious rituals without a care for God's teachings. He rails against them: 'Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day

and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist'. He is making the point that it is not acceptable to portray ourselves as signing up to one thing and then doing the opposite or not doing anything at all. Instead, any rituals should signify our intentions and inspire future action.

The grace of God, the goodness of God, is compared to water in the desert. This water makes us like a watered garden. When we are watered by God, we are fruitful, beautiful, and a source of comfort and well-being to others as well as ourselves. How can Lent this year leave us feeling watered by the grace of God? Hmm.....

I wonder whether you are good at keeping up with friends. I know that it is not always something that I am very good at and even people I have known very well in the past can fall off the radar. Time passes and the relationship seems more distant.

Friends may be near or far away. We can see them every day and then it can get more difficult to keep in touch. Friendships can be important but, our use of time squeezes them out; we are distracted by the demands of life, new ideas, different opportunities.

Again, we might say that friend is a person that whenever we meet, we can pick up the friendship immediately as if there had never been a time when we had been apart. It's also true that a good friend is someone we want to spend more time with, do things with and simply be with. We can be open with them, talk honestly and they will always listen.

A phrase you may have heard before, and that almost sound like a cliché, 'Jesus is the ultimate friend'. He is the truest of friends- not a 'buddy' who will always think the same as us, vote for the same political party, like the same holidays, listen to the same radio or music, go to the same places, keep the same company or even like the same things.

Rather, Jesus, in the way he lives his life and by who he is (the SOG) shows us in an absolutely, amazing way how to live truly In God. As the risen Jesus, he is someone who is always there- the only distance is in our minds! He knows us already so there is nothing in our lives, that we cannot bring to him.

There is no question or confusion that is too big or too small that we can mull over with him. And this is where Lent comes in...

Lent is a gift, a time in the year when the church presents us with a clear invitation (or an opportunity) to focus on what, or on whom, is really important in life. We can make some space in all the demands and distractions to rebalance our lives; find time or, do something which pulls our minds back to God and so draws us closer to Him. To sift, to sort and to reorder our lives.

For each one of us, Lent will be different. It might be to simply start to rethink what we treasure in our life or as Jesus puts it; what's on our heart? It might be to begin that friendship with God through Jesus his Son, whilst for others it may be a refreshing and revitalising of our relationship with God. But wherever we are as an individual on our spiritual journey, today we start side by side, recognising our common humanity before God.

Our foreheads are marked with ashes to humble our hearts and reminds us that life passes away on Earth. We are told "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". The Ashes as a symbol of sorrow and grief symbolise our recognition that we all fall short of living how God intends and the ash helps us to develop a spirit of humility. In taking on the mark of the sign of the cross, we signify the beginning of our preparation for Easter. This same ash is made from palm crosses used in the celebration of Palm Sunday in a previous year. We are reminded of Jesus coming that we might have life. Remember we turn to a God who reaches out to humanity and, most important of all, hold on tight to the knowledge that to all who turn from evil and turn towards the love of God, God is gracious and merciful.

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