

Sermon on Ash Wednesday 2025

by Rev. Bill Church

Recently, Elon Musk sent an instruction to all Federal employees to send him every week an email listing five useful things they had done that week. Failure to comply would be deemed to be a resignation.

Mr Musk may come to realise that you do not win friends and influence people that way; and did he really expect to get truthful replies?

It is, nevertheless, a valuable discipline to look back over a period – maybe a week, maybe a day – and think what good or useful things you have done in that time.

Such as? Well, here are some ideas.

They are not very original, and they would not appeal to Mr Musk, but Jesus might be more encouraging.

I had thought of sorting them into loving God and loving neighbour, but they overlap too much, so I will just go through more or less at random.

Encourage wonder.

Too often, worry or hurry crowd out wonder. So, make space for wonder.

Some people find wonder in mathematical equations (not my personal cup of tea) or the vastness of the cosmos. More concretely, if you have bird table, wonder comes to you. Be amazed at how cheeky robins are. Or look at a dunnock. Ostensibly, this is just a small brown bird, but spot the subtle colouring on its body.

If you are out walking, stop and look around and look up, maybe at a soaring tree, or look down, perhaps at a tiny flower or a strange fungus.

Stop and carry on refreshed and reminded of the wonderful and precious world God has put us in.

Take time to talk with God.

This is easy if you are happy or if you have an urgent ask of God. But don't hide if you are upset or disappointed with life or with God. Read the Psalms. The Psalmists let it all hang out.

They may be praising God, or they may be asking him to destroy their enemies, or they may be scolding God for being unfair or for letting them down.

And definitely don't forget to listen to God – prayer is a two-way thing.

And, while you are at it, don't forget to listen - really listen - to other people. Listen to what they say; and to what they do not

say; and to what they would like to say – and try not to interrupt.

Be grateful.

Complaining that other people are not being grateful enough has been in the international news this week, which is more about the donor's sense of entitlement.

On a more modest scale, it is right to be grateful for any good thing in life. A meal eaten with gratitude is sweeter. Gratitude also reminds us that very few things can be said to be entirely our own work. "We plough the fields and scatter.." but God ensures the harvest. And think about all the effort by other people which makes our life run smoothly and enables our enjoyment.

Think of cleaners, caterers, delivery drivers who bring what we want and binmen who take away what we do not want; even the traffic wardens without whom we would not be able to use the short-term parking spots opposite the church. And, if we feel grateful, we ought to say so.

Be kind.

This seems obvious. The Bible tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

In Charles Kingsley's "Water babies", one character is Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. Maybe even better would be Mrs Doastheotherwouldliketobedoneby.

How we love ourselves might not be how the other would want to be loved. It should be about the receiver not the giver. Maybe my custom of thrusting home produce at people is about me as much as about them.

Kindness is also behind the good Lent tradition of giving up something. Kindness to the world by reducing unneeded consumption and kindness which can be shown with anything saved by self-denial.

Pocket an insult.

There will have been occasions when we have been hurt or offended or insulted by someone else. Sometimes those stay with us. Sometimes they perch on our shoulder and loom large. Take the hurt or offence or insult and put it in your pocket out of sight. Pull it out occasionally and polish it like a cricket ball but mostly leave it there. Give up resentment for Lent.

Happy Lent!

I have never yet been wished a Happy Lent. Will 2025 be the first?