

The readings which we hear on Ash Wednesday, first from Joel, 2nd Corinthians and then from Matthew's gospel are a longstanding tradition of the church and is meant to illuminate the purpose of and appropriate approach to Lenten disciplines. As you may have noticed in the Lenten material which is available at the back of church – the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and charity are key to not only of our Christian lives but in keeping a Holy Lent.

These passages invite us to rethink spiritual disciplines within our current context. In Lent, like the story of Jesus we will hear this coming Sunday, we are invited to explore the wilderness and make space for inner discovery within ourselves and our spiritual life – and allow God to be more visible in the world.

The struggle however is that Spirituality rather than being an expression of faith in many contexts has become an industry that can often be self-serving – What can **I** get out of spirituality? What does it feel like for **me** - how can I be more mindful? How will it

improve **me**? It can be easy in a society which is so driven by consumerism to approach acts of charity, prayer, abstinence, study and worship with the same mentality or mind set – that is, to only see it as something for self-improvement.

The point of Jesus message however is not - *How will this act or discipline give me a higher level of satisfaction?* Matthew's Jesus says, "It's not all about you. Do it because you should -- do it because that's what Christians do." Do it because we will enter a journey of discovery, where yes – we might learn a great deal about ourselves – but more importantly we might see God and the world around us differently too – we may in fact encounter a great deal beyond ourselves – in our community of faith.

Lent is about the way that we live as Christians, and it gives us time to consider the ways in which our lives might distract us and others from our service and love of God. It is about how we might be more aware, mindful or centred on our relationship with God. Our Gospel encourages us to see this as

not just a good idea – or even something that we might benefit from. Rather our gospel reading demands that we see it as part of our Christian duty – an obligation of our faith – or as Paul puts it the way in which we are ambassadors of Christ!

Religious obligations are often hard to talk about; they can make us feel uncomfortable or even old fashioned– but they are a key component of our faith in Jesus Christ. I almost feel embarrassed suggesting we have obligations in faith in a society often too busy, and in which church or faith for many is one choice among many competing demands, rather than an obligation. Yet, as we come this Ash Wednesday, we come to claim we are children of God – and children and heirs who have obligations to fulfil.

For a number of years rather than giving up something for Lent – I tried to take something up. This might sound backwards – but it was about making space for something which would enable my faith to grow and to be aware of God working in, around and through us. (The reality is, I still had to give up

something to make space for the thing I took up) Initially I started doing this because Lent is not about feeling guilt – Lent is about our obligation to live Christian lives – and we need to approach our Lenten discipline in a way and manner that enables each of us to live honestly with God and ourselves.

One way we might live out this obligation during Lent is to make a commitment to actively praying more – making space to pray and being intentional about what we are praying for. The point of this of course is, not only are we interceding for the world and others – we are also strengthening our relationship with God. For it is in pray that our faith and love in God will grow.

When I was a school chaplain, we used to invite each class to make a Lent commitment. The promises ranged from having kind hands and being kind – to being on time for booster classes! The point of a communal promise was that it *shows the love and light of God to each other*. I really liked this phrase because it seems to express the essence of Lent – how do we enter into the wilderness in such a way

that the love and light of Christ is shown to each other?

The most important thing is that we are not just caught up in a trend – Lent is not about giving up sugar or alcohol, because we will lose weight or be healthier – it is about removing those temptations that might limit our ability to let the light of God shine and transform. Of course, the out working of this might be that we do become healthier – but in fact that is what faith in God is – being all that God created us to be requires us to be healthy.

I was really struck a number of years ago by a poem which did the rounds on social media and was attributed to a series of quotes from Pope Francis. Since then, I have tried to find other messages that sum up today's readings as well as this poem does – but to be honest it is hard to find anything that is more to the point.

DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?

In the words of Pope Francis

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

In a few moments our foreheads will be marked with ashes – this is not so that we will take up shame and guilt, rather we take up our inheritance as a child of God. We are reminded of our baptism and the obligation that this places on us to live actively Christian lives. In receiving this ash cross we are reminded that we are God’s creation. Let this mark the start of our journey this Lent, so that when we look back at Easter we might know we showed light and love to others, and achieved something with God this Lent. Amen