

Ash Wednesday 2018: Matthew 6:1-6;16-21

Elements of Lent

I suspect I am not the only one who has been caught rather on the hop by Lent arriving so early. We've only just got over Christmas, and here we are, Ash Wednesday already. I confess to you, brothers and sisters, as of 11.30am this morning, when I was writing this sermon, I had still not quite decided what it was I was doing for Lent this year. I equally confess I had a strong hunch it might have something to do with cappuccinos and luxury toasted fruit bread, which is why I was writing the sermons sat in Starbucks stuffing as much as possible in before I decided I had to give it up!

It may be that even now, you're not quite sure what you're doing for Lent. In which case, take the words of tonight's Gospel as a really good guide. Jesus of course had never heard of Lent and had no intention of telling people how to spend it, but in Matthew Chapter Six he does teach about some of the basics involved in following him. Lent is the time for making sure those basics are in place in our lives: either putting them there for the first time, or deepening them.

So what are the basics?

First things first. Jesus says whatever you do, don't make a big deal of it. Don't do it to be seen by others. Others don't even need to know what you're doing. This is between you and God. Maybe the first thing to give up for Lent is telling others what you're doing for Lent. And then he speaks about three core things. For each of them, he says, 'whenever you do this' – not, 'if you do this' or 'here's something you might like to try if you're an especially advanced Christian'. No, *when you do this*. He assumes we will be doing them. They are basic, ordinary discipleship.

What are they? Almsgiving, Prayer, Fasting.

Almsgiving: I suspect people are probably bored of me saying by now that giving generously, giving *money* generously, is just fundamental to discipleship. Give to the Church, give to the Malawi Project, give to all the other ways in which God's kingdom happens, as people work for justice and peace. Don't let the horror stories about Oxfam or anything else – and they are, truly, horror stories – become an excuse for being selfish. You need to give, for the good of your soul. The whole Bible is clear that greed, greed for money, is the root of all evil. And it is very, very easy to fall into it. So this Lent, think about your giving – and do more than think, give.

Prayer: Being a Christian is all about growing into an ever bigger, deeper, real-er relationship with God. Being good, coming to church, even giving – they're all secondary to that: our small lives being joined up with, filled with, the mystery of God. And that's what our prayers, however unimpressive they seem, are all about. Prayer is about growing into glory, into all that God wants for us, about fulfilling the very point of our existence. And it will not happen by accident. You have to spend serious time praying, serious effort and care and love doing it better and deeper and bigger. Everything in our culture, including much of the nonsense church people often speak about prayer, is designed to put us off that. So in Lent, make the time to pray more, and to learn more about prayer. Our Pilgrim courses on the Lord's Prayer might be a good place to start. Or come to the prayer group on a Wednesday morning, or the quiet communion before that. Whatever you do, think about the place of prayer in your life – and do more than think, *pray*.

And lastly, Fasting. *When* you fast. Not *if*. How is that most of us just don't appear to hear that? I spent the best part of twenty five years discipleship just ignoring it. Even now I've only half paid attention and I know I am not alone. Of course, people are often fond of saying, 'you should take something on rather than give something up.' And 'taking on' is indeed a very good thing. But listen, 'giving up' is basic. Jesus says that if you are his follower somehow, your life is going to be marked by saying 'no' to yourself, and 'no' in the most simple ways: no to that most basic sense of physical hunger. No to the desire for the treat, for self-indulgence. Not that the Christian life must always be 'no', we're not *always* fasting. Easter will come, and there will be feasting. Cakes and Cappucinos or whatever it is there will be in abundance. But there must be *some* time for fasting, for some basic discipline in our lives which says we are about more than eating, drinking, enjoying. We shall not live by bread alone, says Jesus; and to remember that fact it is sometimes necessary to go without bread. So this Lent, ask yourself: where's the necessary 'no' in my life? What place does fasting play? Think about it, and do more than think: *fast*.

Giving, Praying, Fasting. Doing it all without showing off; doing it all to grow towards God. Do that, and together this church will have a really holy and blessed Lent.
Amen.

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