

## Ash Wednesday 2025: Matthew 6:1-6;16-21

### *Elements of Lent*

Those of you who came to church on Sunday morning may have heard me give a slightly less than 100% positive and joyful account of my feelings about Ash Wednesday being just round the corner, about Lent starting. It may have appeared that I was not unqualifiedly ecstatic about this fact. There may even have been the odd hint of grumpiness.

However. Now that it is here, I am reminded that actually Ash Wednesday is one of my favourite days in the Christian year. I think that it is because it is above all the day of back to basics. A reminder that in the end, all we are is creatures before our God. That's what the ash is all about: a reminder that we're fragile, small, vulnerable, flawed, mortal, dusty. Frankly, that of our ourselves we are nothing. And yet, as I also said on Sunday, ash destined for glory, ash that God wants to raise up, to breathe into, to make shine like the sun.

How does ash become glory? Well, by the grace of God alone. Nothing you do or don't do is going to be really decisive for that: the decision was made there, on the Cross of Jesus, in his tomb, and in his glorious resurrection. Fundamentally, it isn't up to you. It isn't about you.

That said... there are ways ash can begin to co-operate. Open itself up, as it were, to what God wants to do. Express its willingness, if you like, for God to raise it up. And that's what I mean by calling it a back-to-basics day. If you listen to the Gospel tonight, and do it, you're putting yourself in the right place for God to do his work. The next forty days are the time for making sure those basics are in place in our lives: either putting them there for the first time, or deepening our practice of them.

So what are the basics? Listen to Jesus in Matthew Chapter 6.

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 do for Lent is to stop 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, especially giving *money* generously, is just fundamental to discipleship. Give to the Church – what a coincidence it is that our Stewardship Campaign is running right now. Give to the Malawi Project, give to all the other ways in which God’s kingdom happens, as people work for justice and peace. You need to give, for the good of your soul. Where your treasure is, there is your heart said Jesus. That means your treasure, your money, needs to be in large generous measure with God and the things God loves: his church, his poor, his vulnerable. 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. Why not join Helen and me at Morning Prayer sometimes, 9.15 every weekday? Why not just make a point of saying the Lord’s Prayer to yourself, deeply and slowly, slowly, every morning? 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 don't really pay 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. Many of you will know that I take the view that there's no way we should fast on Sundays: *every* Sunday, even in Lent, is a feast day of the Resurrection. 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.