

GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE AND MERCY



DAILY REFLECTION
Ash Wednesday 6 March 2019

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Saturday 9 March 2019

Think today about the attitude to self-denial you will bring to your Lenten practice this year. Consider how you might face the challenges along the way – and what might help you to persevere in doing it as an act of love and not just of weary resignation by Week 5.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Isaiah 58:9-14; Psalm 85; Luke 5:27-32

The Lord says:

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.'*

Today's First Reading carries on from yesterday's – with Isaiah teaching about fasting and what it is meant to look like. In some ways, today's is more challenging. Giving up chocolate is hard – but can be easier than refusing the sweet nugget of gossip we are so tempted to share. Not drinking alcohol or smoking can be really challenging – but so can taking the time to listen and to share someone else's burden. Where we choose the harder "fast" – of avoiding evil and doing good – we are assured that we will be lights in the world – and do we not see that the world is often a very dark place for people?

- Do any of the examples in our First Reading seem to hit you with a particular force today?
- How might you avoid the gossip – the burdening – the pointing fingers over the next few weeks?

Spend time today looking back over your beginning to Lent. Reflect on what has already emerged as potential ways forward for you and make a covenant – a sacred agreement – with God to try to live out the ways of love and mercy that he shows you.

Ash Wednesday—6 March 2019

Scripture: Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 50; 2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

*'Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.'*

Joel was writing some time after the Jewish people had returned from exile – a return which was seen as a sign of God's favour. Unfortunately, they were also in the middle of a plague of locusts and drought – which was seen as a sign of God's displeasure. It is easy to blame God when bad things happen but, as so often in dark times, the prophets come up with words of hope. They remind us that bad things – and the consequences of bad actions or decisions – are part of life. But those things do not ever stop God loving us.... this might be how it feels but, as Joel reminds us, God is gracious and abounds in steadfast love.

- When have you been tempted to blame God for bad things happening? Or just wondered where God is in it all?
- How do Joel's words echo (or not) with your own image of God?

Lent is a penitential season which means we face up to our weaknesses and sinfulness and try to do something that, in a way, offers something back – that help to rebalance things. To do this by just focusing on our own sin can make us unhealthily introspective. Spend time today, focusing on God's grace and mercy and his steadfast love for you – and his desire for you to grow into the person he created you to be. Try to make that as real as you can and, in the light of that love, ask for the grace to respond in kind during this Lent.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Luke 9:22-25

Moses said, 'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.'

The Hebrew people have spent forty years in the wilderness working up to this moment. God drew them out of their labour in Egypt and set about forming them as a people destined to live in the Promised Land. They are close to their destination. Moses seeks to remind them of all the God has done for them and of the way of life God has called them to live – and to point out that they have a choice. They can choose to live in this godly way – and have life in all its fullness or they can choose to turn away from God – but that turning-away will have its consequences.

- Why do you think Moses felt the need to issue a reminder at this point in the Exodus?
- How does living in God's way give us life? And turning against God bring us "death"?

Spend time today thinking about the day-to-day choices we all make – of the little things we do and say that give us and others life... and the little things that damage us and others. Use Moses' words from the end of today's Reading as a prayer through the day:

*Choose life ...
loving the Lord your God,
obeying him,
and holding fast to him.*

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-9; Psalm 50; Matthew 9:14-15

*The Lord says,
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?*

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...'*

The image of people going around drooping like old bulrushes is certainly memorable! It is hard to imagine it attracting people to join us if we adopt this attitude to Lent! Fasting is putting your own wants and needs to one side but if the focus is on what I am giving up and how hard this is, it is not having the desired effect on our spiritual life. To go without something can make space in our lives to give something to others. To go without a favourite treat for 40 days loses its impact if we look miserable or, worse, hoard them until Easter. To go without a favourite treat and put it – or its cash equivalent – into a foodbank or charity box – means the focus is not on you but on reaching out in love to those in need.

- How do you feel about "giving something up" for Lent?
- How do you stop it being all about you – and become more about being a way to reach out to others?