

Ash Wednesday St Stephen's 7pm Matt 6: 1-6,16-21  
17.2.21

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (v1)

Every Wednesday a man went into his local pub and ordered 3 pints of beer, which he proceeded to drink by himself. The barmaid's curiosity was roused and she asked him why he did this?

He explained that he used to go out every Wednesday with his two brothers. They were now both working overseas, and they'd agreed that wherever they were they would continue to go out each Wednesday, buy three pints, and drink each other's health.

The barmaid was touched by his account and so was disturbed a few weeks later when he only ordered two pints. She expressed the hope that nothing serious had happened to his brothers. "Oh, no," he replied. "It's nothing like that. You see, I've given up beer for lent."

I wonder how many people who don't go to church regularly still give up something for Lent? I suspect that it's far fewer today than say twenty years ago. Far more may look to their horoscope for guidance than the Church, looking for some helpful and encouraging words, such as: *"Take note of what happens around the time of the new moon in your own sign on Wednesday, because it marks the end of a chapter and the beginning of the next. And if that means plotting a completely new course through life, so be it."* For the first day of Lent, I have to admit that that's not a bad piece of advice. Lent is a good time to plot a new course through life.

A woman had just moved and started a new job, and was telling a colleague how unhappy she was in her old job, and determined to start again in a new area. When the removers arrived, they asked her what she wanted them to pack. "Everything," she said. When she arrived at her new home, she found the men had taken her literally. Along with her furnishings, books and other items, there was all her rubbish – old newspapers, empty bottles, apple peelings and orange skins.

Lent is a time when we can begin to deal with the rubbish in our lives – which calls for a willingness for self-examination; a chance to deepen faith in, and service to, our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church. So Lent is a God-given time to slow down, take stock, and for starting a new course in our life of faith.

For many it will simply mean that they will give up something – chocolate, alcohol, cakes and biscuits. For some of us this is almost a necessity. But surely Lent must mean something more than this? We must put into effect what we discover about ourselves so that it makes a permanent difference.

The three lessons set for today makes clear. The first reading from the prophet Joel says that unless there is a change of heart, outward show is not enough. The people may weep, gnash their teeth, rend their garments and cover their heads with ashes, but if there is no change of heart, it will be so much wasted effort.

The alternative reading from Isaiah makes the same point, pointing out that they show their obedience to God by their behavior towards others in need, not from outward show.

St Paul certainly agrees. The Corinthian Church was riven with dissension, status seeking, resentment and criticism. Paul reminds them that in Christ there is a new creation, that faith is to change us. Our focus is now set on the things of God, not on earthly values.

The gospel sets out ways in which this change can come about, through alms-giving, prayer and fasting, to which we can add Bible study, and, perhaps, other reading to deepen faith, but doing so in ways which do not draw attention to ourselves, and to undertake whatever we do with cheerfulness. But there are other things we might consider: dealing with that feeling of bitterness; or attempting to heal relationships that have been damaged; or how we use our authority; or our use of time and money.

We have to realize that whatever we undertake during Lent will demand self-discipline – we can achieve nothing on the cheap. A man was watching a large moth start to leave its cocoon. It seemed to get stuck, having started to split. So, hoping to help it out, he made a larger split, so that the moth could crawl out. When it did so, it remained with stunted wings and a bloated body. By preventing the moth to struggle out of the cocoon, the fluids in its body hadn't been forced in to the wings, so that it never properly developed. To be a success, lent must be a struggle on our part to keep things going.

And the purpose of our keeping lent is so that the grace of God may be manifested in our lives, especially in our dealings with others. We are not to parade our virtues before people, but the effect of our struggle should be visible in the sort of people we are and the way we behave.

In a few moments you will be invited to join with me to reflect on our lives, and to come forward for the imposition of ashes – a reminder of the transience of our lives and the importance of an ever-closer walk with God. Jesus said: "The light is among you still, but not for long. Go on your way while you still have the light so that darkness may not overtake you. He who journeys in the dark does not know where he is going. Trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become children of light." (Jn 12: 35,36)

The different aspects of our keeping of lent must all stand together. It is possible to pray, and yet for it to be divorced from daily life. Again, we may fast, but without it helping us come closer to God. The one should inform the other. And remember, fasting may not simply be from food or drink; but fasting from wrong-doing; fasting from the things with which we punish ourselves – self-pity, blaming others for our faults, nursing grievances, blaming other for failed relationships.

This is why a sense of thankfulness is so important, for it helps us to realize how much we have received from others, and above all from God, so kindling a right spirit within us, and helping to restore relationships.

This brings us back to prayer, for being truly thankful must lead to prayer, which in turn should lead to action.

The gospel for today ends with the words of Jesus: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ..... but treasures in heaven." (v19) It is here, surely, where so much of modern life has gone wrong. The good life is seen in terms of wealth, status, power – in earnings and ownings. VSO reported some time ago at the number of high paid individuals who had discovered that wealth does not buy happiness or fulfillment; that there were other, deeper, more important needs which need to be fulfilled.

Rudyard Kipling addressed a graduating class at McGill University in Canada, and told the students not to place too much importance on wealth, because if they did, they would face difficulties throughout their lives. "Do not pay too much attention to fame, power, money," he said. "Some day you will meet a person who cares for none of these things, and then you will know how poor you are."

Lent is a time for considering just what is important in our lives. We are not asked to make a nod towards piety, but to thirst after righteousness.