

ASH WEDNESDAY -2021

Joel 2:12-18

2Cor 5:20-6:2

Mk 6:1-6;16-18

“Welcome thou feast of Lent; Who loves not thee, He loves not Temperance, or Authority, but is composed of passion.” So writes George Herbert, an Anglican priest and poet (1593-1633).

Herbert describes Lent as a feast rather than a fast because of all the spiritual riches the observance of Lent can bring us. Fasting, at least intermittent fasting, is very fashionable in order to create a lean trim new self, but prayerful Lenten fasting is less fashionable but will create a much healthier Christ-like like soul. Ash Wednesday is the Christian equivalent of the Jewish Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement when Jews do penance by wearing sackcloth and ashes. Being ‘ashed’ on Ash Wednesday has been practised since the 11th century, but as the prophet Joel tells us we should ‘rend our heart and not our garments’ (Joel 2:13) and be reconciled to God, as St Paul also urges us.

Because of Covid we will not be marked with a cross of ash but like elephants throwing dust over themselves, we will be sprinkled with ash on our heads – so ensuring your hairstyle is ruined (except mine of course). I think we should do this to maintain unity with our fellow members of the Church throughout the world who are affected by Covid much more than we are.

The practice of ashing reminds us that we are mortal – we are but dust. It reminds us that we will also have to give an account of our faithfulness at the final Judgment. It is an invitation to acknowledge that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and so need to change our life’s direction and purify ourselves in order to let go of our self-focus in order to become more God focussed. In other words, to repent.

Lent is a time of prayer and fasting, but our fasting shouldn’t be mere tokenism – giving up whisky and drinking boutique gin instead! Fasting in a small but meaningful way will achieve the objective of reminding why we are fasting just as much as a complex programme. We can fast from things other than food – some people give up Twittering or Facebooking!

Together with giving something up, we should make a greater effort to increase our worship, prayer time and spiritual reading – reflecting on the daily mass readings using the Lent Book or other devotions is a good way to go. Above all, spend some time each day in silence before God – saying nothing, praying nothing other than to allow God to come into our hearts. As the psalmist says, ‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Ps 46:10). Or as TS Eliot puts it in his poem Ash Wednesday, ‘Teach us to care and not to care, teach us to sit still.’ Also, think about making a gift to some worthy Catholic charity or fund, not as a substitute for your Lenten discipline, but as part of it.

The late Bp of Toronto, Bp Finlay gave this advice,

Fast from excess and feast on simplicity,
Fast from negatives and feast on alternatives,
Fast from discontent and feast on gratitude,
Fast from gossip and feast on silence,
Fast from self-concern and feast on compassion,
Fast from anxiety and feast on faith.

We may not totally succeed but it is better to try and fall short than not to try at all.
Welcome thou feast of Lent.

Msgr Harry Entwistle
Feb 2021