

Ash Wednesday 2024

St Luke, Tutshill.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places.”

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Christian social media absolutely loves it when Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine’s Day, as it does this year, and indeed as it did in 2018. You get lots of amusing pictures and memes and what-not turning up. There is one doing the rounds at the moment that you may have seen. It’s effectively a spoof Valentine’s Day card for a year when Valentine’s Day is also Ash Wednesday. The text reads, “you can’t have Valentine without ‘Lent’”, which is of course true. The word ‘Lent’ is right in the middle of the word ‘Valentine’. The picture is one of those sugary candy love hearts, you know the ones that have sappy sayings on them like ‘be mine’. This one says ‘remember that you are dust.’

Today we set out, with Christians across the world, on our Lenten journey. We strike out into the wilderness, as we do every year, for 40 days (or 46 days if you think the Sundays count – *discuss*), an annual journey that begins here with ashes. With dust. With the symbol of our mortality. ‘Remember that you are dust.’ It begins here with penitence - what follows this sermon is an extended period of repentance, deliberately long today, and actually deliberately *slow*, to give us time to really think about that act of confession that we can quite often rush through quite quickly on a Sunday morning to get to the next

hymn. It begins here with *silence* - again rather more silence than we are used to in our noisy and cluttered lives.

And this year, as a parish, we are going to be focusing ourselves this Lent, particular through our Lent groups, which will meet here in St Luke’s starting next Tuesday evening, on that central biblical image of the wilderness. Every year the gospel reading on the first Sunday of Lent is the account of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. Every year we recall Christ being driven into that desert place at the beginning of his adult ministry, and so this year we are going to think about the wilderness as the place through which Christ had to journey, but also the place through which we, too, journey, on our way back home to God. And we will be thinking about that wilderness journey as a Spirit-led journey, as a sorrowful, as a simple, as a truth-speaking, and a sacrificial journey. Those will be our themes, and there will be little daily quotes to help us as well, on the parish Facebook group and in other places.

But we start here. And we recognise that there is something about this annual Lenten journey which is ‘secret’. Or to put it another way, which is personal and interior. The Lent material uses the word *secret*, because of course that’s the word you heard several times in our gospel reading a moment ago. Three times we are told; when you give alms - in other words when you are charitable - when you pray, and when you fast, do it privately. Do it *secretly*. And then those identical words three times, “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Lent is a gift. Lent is a love letter from God to you. Lent, to go back to my opening image, is a Valentine’s card. It is that annual moment that we remind ourselves - and Lent goes right back into the very early practice of the church - it is our annual moment to remember that we hugely overcomplicate our faith.

We have aggregated, built-up, so much stuff around our practice of Christianity that we sometimes forget that actually this is very simple indeed. God says to us, says to you, says to me, personally, secretly, 'I love you. Do you love me?' It really is that simple, and that profound. I love you. Do you love me?

And if we can remember that, if, at this point, at the beginning of annual journey, we can remember that it is actually all about love, then our Lenten journey stops being an tedious, dour time of more silence, more prayer, more feeling guilty about ourselves, where we have to slog through dreary hymns instead of all the jolly ones that we want to sing. And it becomes a really focused period for us to answer that question, 'do you love me?', with as much of a 'yes' as we can muster, poor fallen creatures though we be.

So yes, we receive the ash today. And it is a very stark reminder of our mortality. Of the fact that we are not God. That our worship is not about us, and how we want to feel, about our choices, our preferences, but rather about how we answer that question, that Valentine's card from God, do you love me?

So we do a hard reset. We sweep all of the things that we have allowed to gather and get piled up and cluttered on God's throne - we sweep all that off and onto the floor in the extended period of penitence we are just about to go into. And then as a reminder of that, a physical reminder, we receive the ash onto our forehead. But very much more importantly, we receive it into our hearts. It's not about everyone outside seeing the cross afterwards, and the gospel reading today has some things to say about how badly things go wrong when we start doing Christianity to impress other people - it doesn't matter if you wipe the cross off your forehead in the porch. As long as you don't wipe it from your heart.

These 40 days are a gift. And opportunity to fall in love with God again. Secretly. Privately. Interiorly. In our heart. And by using the disciplines of this season: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, study - maybe the Lent course, maybe taking time to talk with the clergy or ministers about your own spiritual life - we'd love to have that conversation with you - by doing that you do the only thing that actually true love demands, which is faithfulness.

The key to understanding the ashing is to read to the end of the sentence. We say, 'remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, turn away from sin...' and then the promise, the invitation, the love-letter... 'And be faithful to Christ.'

Faithful to you and I, Christ strides into the desert, to endure temptation. Faithful to Christ, we stumble into the desert after him, in this holy season of Lent, to do our best, as inadequate as that will be, to respond to the invitation to love. So all of our giving, praying, fasting, studying, our temporary setting aside of some usual effervescence, is nothing but a loving response to the one in whom we find that the darkness is as noon day, our wilderness is running with crystal-clear water, and our Father who sees in secret is rewarding us.

Amen.