

Ash Wednesday - 2023

Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 50; 2nd Cor; Matt 6:1-6. 16-18

It has taken me a little while to get to this point. And the point that I have got to is that I am quite looking forward to Lent. At one time I looked on Lent as dreary and a slog. As I progressed I thought that it had some really important and life-giving points, but was still miserable. Gradually, I began to understand the necessity of an increased focus on **Prayer** – which I was quite feeble at –, an understanding of the real benefits **Fasting** – benefits which go beyond any idea of giving up those things which might be considered treats, or un-healthy –; and **Almsgiving** – which goes far beyond an increased giving to charity or those in need. Bit by bit, year by year, it all has become easier, and I have been able to set more and more ambitious targets. There are side-effects of course. I might become a little tetchy because of the lack of caffeine or sugar, but I no longer begrudge their absence and spend my time pining for their return on Easter Day. As you may have guessed it took me a little while to realise - and to put it into my frame of mind - that I was not giving up anything: I was giving it all back to God. There is no begrudging love.

We will definitely – if we are doing it right – experience discomfort at Lent as we try to let go of some of that spiritual and material baggage that we have accumulated. Part of our problem is that we like to hold on to everything. It is part of our fallen, sinful condition, that we find it easier to close our hands around what we want then to open our hands and let go. If anything, this discomfort should show us exactly how much we need **Prayer** and **Fasting** and **Almsgiving**. But what it shouldn't be is a miserable, miserly, resentful

encounter, because that will not be an encounter with God at all, that is only an encounter with ourselves.

I know that Lent can be difficult, but it should be willingly undertaken. Its structure of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving is there to strengthen us so that we can lift our eyes towards God, not depress us so that we drop our eyes to the earth.

A few years ago I was given a copy of a booklet entitled '*Thirty-three Days to Morning Glory*' which is a devotion to the Total Consecration to Mary. The reading for Day Four became my focus for that Lent and for every subsequent Lent. The reading was from St Louis De Montfort's 'Consecration to Mary' and this is what it says:

This devotion consists, then, of giving ourselves entirely to Our Lady, in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her. We must give her 1) our body with all its sense and its members; 2) our soul, with all its powers; 3) our exterior goods of fortune, whether present or to come; 4) our interior and spiritual goods, which are of merits and our virtues and our good works, past, present and future.'

See how well this fitted with the Church's practices at Lent?:

- 1) *our body with all its sense and its members*; that's **Fasting**
- 2) *our soul, with all its powers*; that's **Prayer**
- 3) *our exterior goods of fortune, whether present or to come*; - that's **Almsgiving**
- 4) *our interior and spiritual goods, which are of merits and our virtues and our good works, past, present and future.'* – that's all that we might achieve through **Fasting, Prayer and Almsgiving**.

Ash Wednesday - 2023

The reason we are invited give all our deeds over to Mary – without any strings attached - is so that she, Mary, can present them to her Son. She gives them to her Son, for what use she sees fit and not as I see fit. This means that the benefits of my prayers, and the spiritual good of all my works , are given where they are most needed, not where I think they are most needed.

So that is going to be my Lent. There is plenty to do, and I am quite looking forward to it, ashes and all.