

## **Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2021: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

*...when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face... (Matthew 6:17)*

Recently I heard someone exclaim: “I never thought I’d ever say it, but I’m so happy for Ash Wednesday!” We have endured another hiatus in worship because of Covid-19. No, things are not ideal. Yet, we are so happy for Ash Wednesday.

Joy and Lent are not incompatible. I have not thought Lent joyless since coming into the Church in 1975. Maybe I had an extraordinary rector, or read the right books, or something. I realize through the centuries the Church has often made Lent a heavy burden. No doubt this also explains why for centuries, and especially today, Lent is ignored not only by those outside the Church but by many Christians, too.

Lent was not first observed as a season of imposed or self-punishment, but as a time of intense preparation and a time of remedy. In the early Church, roughly 2<sup>nd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Lent was for final preparation before baptism, which only took place before daylight on Easter morning. The baptismal candidates went through 2 or 3 years of preparation, the last 40 days being deep spiritual preparation. Forty days in imitation of Jesus’ time in the wilderness. This spiritual preparation did include fasting. Rather quickly, Lent also became a time of repentance for those who had denied Christ during persecutions and then wanted to return to Christian fellowship. Over time, all Christians prepared for Easter in solidarity with the baptism candidates and ‘notorious sinners.’ Originally Lent was final preparation for Easter Baptism—a joyous event—and as remedy for sin, deniers being officially welcomed back at Easter—a joyous event.

How can Lent be joyous? Here are two suggestions. First, Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5 (9b, 10): *...I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me...I take pleasure in my weaknesses...for when I am weak, then I am strong.* We are sinners, but our sins do not keep us from God—for *while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8)—what hinders us is our refusal to release our sins to God and be healed. While we do not glory in our sins, sin is what theologians called in Latin, ‘felix culpa,’ literally a ‘happy fault.’ Because God’s merciful, forgiving love is stronger than all human sin, our sin occasions God’s always eternally abundant grace. We grieve our sins; and we rejoice in God’s loving-kindness. In surrendering our sins to our saving Savior, we are saved; and therefore rejoice.

The second suggestion comes from the verse with which I began: *...when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face...* Lent is not about your sin but God’s forgiveness. Therefore, our practices are to look more like a birthday party than a funeral. We both let go and take on. Some form of fasting is in order: doing without some food, curbing other appetites, foregoing criticism, anger, judgment—whatever hinders us. More suggestions are on the sheet, “Doing Lent,” available at the exit. Lent is also for beginning new practices or renewing neglected practices of prayer, worship, study, thought, and works of mercy. We do what we do for God’s glory, not as displays of self-righteousness. Since God’s glory fills us with joy, God’s glorious joy shines through our spiritual disciplines.

Let go what hinders joy; take on what prepares you to receive more joy. Lent is begun: be joyful, our sins are nothing—God saves!

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.