

ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON 2017 SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

The bishop in his cathedral on the first day of Lent invites all those in communion with him to come together across the diocese to observe this solemn time, which challenges us and invites us to experience afresh our sense of solidarity, of communion and of mutual responsibility. It is a day of opportunity and potential. And above all else it is a day of prayer.

George Herbert, the saintly Anglican priest and poet of the 17th century, the Vicar of Bemerton in this Diocese, spoke of this season of Lent not as a fast, but as a feast. And later in this service, within the Eucharistic Prayer, we shall find ourselves praying: “As we prepare to celebrate the Easter feast with joyful hearts and minds we bless you for your mercy.”

Joyful hearts and minds? Joyful hearts and minds in Lent? Lent a feast? Is that how you see it? More often people have seen it as a dreary dour season. They have either resented it and wished its forty days over as fast as possible. Or, just a little more positively, they have seen it as a kind of purgatory through which we need to pass because of our rebellion and sin. Dreary and dour.

But joy and feast? That strikes a different note. Perhaps the Church has gone soft. Perhaps the old disciplines – the fasting, the prayer, the abstinence, the penitence, the spiritual reading, the solemn music – of Lent are now thought inappropriate. Is that why it is a joy and feast? No need to go in for this giving up business? Leave all that behind.

But the introduction to our liturgy today invites us, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word. And that's quite a tall order. But that's what we are called to do in the days and weeks ahead as we embrace this season of Lent. But it is not all theoretical, but very practical, especially across the diocese of Salisbury. We have been given a most wonderful resource, *Praying Together, Lent 2017*. Look what this treasure of a book provides. Lent invites us to read and meditate on God's holy Word. *Praying Together* gives us a short bible passage to read and a thought on which to pause and reflect for a longer or shorter time. *Praying Together* encourages us in a section each day to think a little about self-denial, about fasting, about acts of charity, not big dramatic gestures, but simple disciplines that feed the soul.

But then there is the prayer and that's where our particular emphasis is this Lent. We have gathered in four centres to reflect on how we may deepen our experience of God in prayer. And in Praying Together we have given ourselves some beautiful and helpful prayer. Something practical each day, something inviting us a little deeper into a sense of God's presence.

But that is not all. For we are invited also to develop a deeper commitment to one another as we pray for one another across the churches, parishes, schools and communities of the diocese, holding up each to God in Prayer, supporting one another, naming one another, being thankful for the ministry of each. The evidence is that we haven't made as much as we might of this diocesan cycle of praying and have thus missed some opportunities and Ash Wednesday might be a fresh start day. A whole diocese in common prayer for one another each day. It's a powerful thought. Better still, a powerful reality. And it is all about praying together.

I want to say that I believe that we need the fasting, the prayer, the abstinence and penitence, the spiritual reading and the solemn music more than ever, probably the prayers most of all! An age where there is more food on the

supermarket shelves than ever before needs to learn the wisdom of fasting. A world where we rush from one excitement or another, or one duty to another, needs space and silence that leads to prayer. A culture of indulgence needs abstinence. A society that has lost its moral certainties need repentance. A generation that communicates by sound-bites needs spiritual reading. A Church that celebrates a friendly, accessible compassionate God needs music that pulls us up short before the majesty and the holiness of God. And a time of political turmoil, of international instability and of fear for the planet needs fasting, prayer, abstinence, penitence and much more in generous measure.

So is this talk of joyful heart and mind, this sense of feast, mistaken? No. The joy is not in escaping the old disciplines but in embracing them. The feast is the fast. Lent is one of those “turn the conventions of the world upside down” kind of seasons. Praying and fasting and all the other things begin to have their effect quite quickly. Within days, let alone weeks, we can sense that we are less enslaved to the material, more in touch with the spiritual, healthier, more alive, more alert, more sensitive, more human. All that comes from the time-honoured disciplines. We begin to feel good. Feel good factor. It’s not far from feel good

factor to joyful heart and mind. But it is the disciplines that get us there. The fast itself begins to feel like a feast.

But hold on, you may be saying, I thought Lent was about Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and isn't that about as static as you can get, stuck in the desert for six weeks. What's dynamic about that? Here we have to sort out a confusion. Lent is not about Jesus in the wilderness and you notice that the gospel for today is not that story about temptation from the devil. We do hear that next Sunday, simply because, if we are keeping a time of spiritual fitness training, we need some bible stories that engage with that to encourage us. And Jesus doing the same is just such a story.

But the Lent story is not just the wilderness story, but the hillside story, the story of Jesus walking with his cross until he comes to Calvary, though to get there we may well walk through the desert and find it a strangely purifying place to be. But the Lent invitation is not to stop in the wilderness, but to try to keep up with Jesus as we walk resolutely towards that goal. And all the way he walks, not with a glum face like one who goes to his doom, but with the joy of one who does the Father's will, who knows that the cross will become a source of life and

peace, and with a lightness in his step. More feast than fast. And that is the pilgrimage which begins for us today also.

But, of course there is a problem, for us, though not for him. The problem is sin. How can we walk joyfully behind him, or even trap him in conversation, or tell him, in our restrained English sort of way that we love him and would give our lives for him, when sin gets in the way? You need to understand that the principal outcome we are looking for is growth – growth in faith, growth in discipleship, growth in wisdom, growth in Christlikeness, growth in love of God and one another and, in a particular sense, of self. That is what God wants to bring about in us through the Lenten pilgrimage. Growth, at least as much as penitence.

But penitence, lest you thought I had forgotten it, is what today is about. Ash Wednesday is the principal penitential day of the year. We focus hard on our sin today, not so that it may depress us or open wider the gap between God and ourselves. We focus hard on our sin today, both so that there may be real self-knowledge, self-awareness, which is the pre-condition to growth, and also so that we may, having identified our sin, hand it over to Christ, let go of our

burden, receive forgiveness, so that, set free, we can walk with him through the desert to the cross.

At the heart of our service tonight is a silence in which we do just that. We identify our sin and we hand it over to Christ. We let him put his cross upon us once again, a sign both of our penitence and his forgiveness. The cross will be marked again on each one of us in dust and ashes to mark our penitential entry into the Lenten feast and fast. It's not a bit of showing off to the world – Jesus warns us against that in today's gospel. You don't have to wear that black smudge through Lent any more than you have to wear a long face. Wash it off as soon as you get home, just as Christ washes you clean of sin. It is a sign just for you, the cross traced once again upon you, to put you under starter's orders for the Lenten pilgrimage, which is more marathon than sprint through the desert to the cross. The cross is the sign of rejection, of failure, of pain, of humiliation. And yet, for the Christian, it turns out to be the sign of life and joy and peace and victory. It's another of those “turn the conventions of the world upside down” elements of faith. The cross is joy hidden in shame. Good Friday is glory hidden in tragedy. Just as Lent is feast hidden in fast.

Feast hidden in fast. Yes, there is a need to fast. But if the ashes are the sign of the fast, equally tonight Jesus gives you the food and drink of the feast. It is a demanding journey we are going to make through Lent to Easter and we need food and drink for the journey. Sinners as we are, even today he gives us bread. Not the bread of this world's physical hunger, for Lent reminds us that we do not live on bread alone, but the bread, the sustenance, of his holy word, the word "that proceeds from the mouth of God", and the bread also of the Eucharist, "bread of angels" who ministered to Christ through forty desert days. Food for the journey. The Church gives us ash, a sign of reconciliation. Christ gives us bread, the feast for those who have been reconciled, and he gives it again and again.

So, with joyful hearts and minds, hear these words from one of today's Eucharistic Prayers, one that will be in use in many churches across the diocese today.

"In these forty days you lead us into the desert of repentance that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may in grow in grace and learn to be your people once again. Through fasting, prayer and active service you bring us back to your generous heart. Through study of your holy word your open our

eyes to your presence in the world and free our hands to welcome others into the radiant splendour of your love.”

This is our opportunity to commit ourselves to bible study, to reflection, to acts of charity, to fasting, above all to prayer especially prayer for one another.

Through this holy season, let us embrace together the disciplines of this season, more feast than fast, and walk together, and, before long, experience the feel-good factor once again – more alive, more alert to Christ, to his people and to the world for which he died.