

Lent as never before

A sermon prepared by Revd William Whyte for Ash Wednesday 2021

Refs: Isaiah 58. 1-12; 2 Corinthians 5. 20b - 6.10; Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

It's the start of Lent. The start of what's meant to be 40 days of fasting and prayer and self-denial.

But, to be honest, it feels a little like we've had a whole year of Lent. As lockdown follows lockdown; as crisis follows crisis; as we're about to mark a full twelve months since the country first shut down in response to COVID-19: how is Lent meant to feel any different? After a year of self-denial, what are we meant to do? How are we meant to make Lent meaningful and different from what's become the new normal?

Well, as our Gospel shows us, the one way that we're not going to achieve all that is to compete with one another in making ourselves miserable. That's always a bad idea because it focuses our attention in completely the wrong direction and on completely the wrong thing. It directs it to us, to ourselves, to our own pride and competitiveness and feelings of self-worth. It distracts us from the important thing, which is God, and our relationship with God, rather than ourselves. To focus on what I can give up, to obsess about the self – even in self-denial – is to miss the point of Lent.

And trying to make ourselves miserable – competing in self-denial, as the Gospel has it – is especially foolish this year. In our current crisis, in this third and hardest lockdown of them all, it would be only too easy to be miserable. It would be easier still to focus in on ourselves, to become ever more inward-looking, ever more concerned with ourselves.

But, in fact, to experience Lent in the current lockdown is an invitation to do quite the reverse. Indeed, in some respects, there's no better time to focus on our relationship with God than here and now. Lockdown has stripped away the distinctions, robbed us of our hobbies, our pastimes, our Churchgoing, our trips out and meals out, and much more besides. It has, however, left us with the time, and with the opportunity to encounter God. We can find God in nature, God in conversation, God in our friends, and our family, even if they are far away.

Just as importantly, we *need* to find God in all this. If we're going to get through it, if we're going to make it to the other side of this lockdown – and to the other side of the pandemic as a whole – we need that sense of love, of hope, of freedom that God can give us.

So this Lent, as never before, let us look for God, let us take time to find the signs of God's love. Let us do whatever we can, whatever's necessary, whatever's possible to search out God and build a stronger, deeper relationship with God.

Whether that's through prayer, or conversation; whether it's through silence or through sound; whether it's through company or in isolation: let's all of us together find our own way to God.

There are no rules. There are no hierarchies. There's no better or worse way to God. Find what works – and do it. Do it for yourself, for those you love, for those you don't. Above all, do it for God.

That's always the message and the meaning of Lent. It's always true. But it feels more urgent, more necessary, more vital this year than ever before.