

**Ash Wednesday**  
*Tidenham Parish, over Zoom, 2021*

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17*  
*Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Lord, take my words and speak through them. Take our minds, and think through them. Take our lives, and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

I think there are two sides to the Christian life which, at their best, complement each other perfectly. At their worst they can almost appear to be two entirely different sets of priorities. And those two sides are contemplation and action. Contemplation and action. We see those two sides most clearly in the gospel story of Mary and Martha. That is not one of the reading set for today, but you remember it I'm sure. Jesus is at the home of three of his friends: Lazarus, Mary and Martha. And Mary sits at Jesus' feet and just listens. Martha is busy with sorting out food, hospitality and all the rest of it, and complains to Jesus that it is not fair that she has to do all the work whilst Mary gets to just bathe in the presence of Christ. I'm sure you remember the story.

This year, since last Ash Wednesday, has kind of impact-tested that tension between active Christianity and contemplation: the idea that the most important thing we can do is to simply sit in the presence of Christ. Some of us, including me, huge parts of this past year and spent not only in lockdown but also under shielding. I was shielding until July last year, and have been again since just after Christmas. Lots of people have been stuck in the four walls of their homes, often quite frightened and uneasy. For people like me it has effectively been a season of forced contemplation. For others it has been a season of frenzied

activity. For our NHS most obviously, but also for lots of people who work with the public. Teachers have had to work out how to do their job in a totally different way. So have churches. And there has been probably too much time spent obsessing about online worship, Zoom, and technical wizardry.

And I have heard more than one person say that we really don't need Lent this year. That actually the whole of life has been Lent for most of us, and that the last thing we need is a season of penitence right now. That we have given up so much that we really don't need to be giving up things for Lent. I understand that point of view, but I think it is wrong.

Lent is a season of hope. In his very last sermon before he died Bishop Michael Perham preached in Salisbury Cathedral on Ash Wednesday, and he reminded us that Lent is a season of hope. That it is always angled towards, pointing towards, Easter. That there is a direction, a thrust, to this season which, of course, happens, at least in our part of the world, during spring. As we take flowers out of our churches for Lent, they are blossoming on every verge and roadside. As we make our lives a little simpler, the world around us is once again becoming full of colour, scent and brightness.

For centuries the church has read these two readings on Ash Wednesday. At least since the 1500s these passages from Joel and Matthew have set us off on our journey. And they are really about focus.

We misunderstand Lent if we think that it is a season of penitence for the sake of feeling miserable about ourselves. Yes, it is a season of penitence. It is good to simplify our lives. That's where the giving up of things comes from. In my case, booze

and puddings. And I hope that by doing that I might give up an inch or so from my waistline as well!

But we give things up, we go into the desert, if you like, to find things. And here is why I don't agree with people who say that we don't need Lent this year. Because Lent is not about moving further away from people. It is about becoming closer to them. To those around us, to our brothers and sisters in the church, and above all to Christ. Thomas Merton, the great Cistercian monk of the 20<sup>th</sup> century said this: "we do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good."

We do not go into the desert to escape people, but to learn how to find them.

And the three ancient disciplines that the church encourages us to take up during this 40-day journey towards Easter are all about finding those things that matter. Those disciplines: prayer, fasting, almsgiving (or charity) are all about clearing the decks, sweeping away the stuff that clogs up our attention, so that we can find ourselves, our brothers and sisters, and most importantly find Christ.

And here's where that active and contemplative tension finds its resolution I think. Think back over the gospel reading again. What does Christ say: whenever you give alms... Whenever you pray... Whenever you fast... Do it in secret.

So we are expected to be charitable. We are expected to pray. We are expected to fast. But we do it privately. Here is action and contemplation together. We do something, but we do it to

unclog the communication channels between us and God. And actually that is something that we can do very well in lockdown.

So it is about reclaiming a bit of our time, over the next 40 days, through those ancient disciplines, which this year we will be exploring through the idea of renewal, focusing on everyday household objects as lenses through which to reconnect with God. You are being invited to have a go at that balanced life of activity *and* contemplation. To reclaim some of that stuff that the lockdown has threatened, with its constant chatter about case numbers, deaths, timetables, mutations and variants. Actually to gather all of those things up, and to sit down with them at the feet of Jesus, and let them go. To journey into the desert, not out of some perverse delight in misery, but because we know that in the desert, in the silence, in the stillness in the midst of the everyday, we are most likely to hear the voice of our Lord calling us. We don't go into the desert to escape people, but to learn how to find them.

And we start today. And we have to use our imagination a bit more. If you have ash with you, in a minute you will be invited to use it. But it doesn't matter if you don't. Because again here is something that our Lord calls us to do in secret. In private. It is our hearts, not our foreheads, that Christ is interested in. So in a minute impose ash, imaginary or real, upon your heart. Recognise your mortality, yes. But recognise too that it is the simple, sinful, you whom God calls. Turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ. Strike out into the desert, and you might just find that you are not running away from anything, but running straight into the arms of Christ.

Amen.