

Ash Wednesday 2025

St Luke, Tutshill.

Isaiah 58:1-12

John 8:1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

How do you catch monkeys? No, I haven't gone mad! That was the opening line of one of the very few sermons I can remember hearing. I'm terrible at remembering sermons. But years back, I think probably in 1999, my university chaplain began his Ash Wednesday sermon by asking us, 'How do you catch monkeys?' And he told us of an old technique for catching monkeys. You get a really heavy, clear glass decanter, you know one of those with a really wide heavy base that curves up to a really narrow neck. And you put something shiny in the bottom of it, and set it down on the ground. And the monkey comes past, and he sees the shiny thing in the bottom of the decanter, and wants it. So he puts his hand into the narrow neck and grabs the shiny thing. But of course, when he comes to take his hand back out, it's gripped tightly around the shiny thing, and it will no longer fit out of the narrow neck of the decanter. So the monkey has to lope along, slowly, dragging the decanter behind it. And you can walk up and grab him. And so obsessed is the monkey with possessing this shiny thing that it never occurs to him to simply open his hand, stop grasping the shiny thing, and escape.

Lent, we were told in that sermon, is the season in which we identify the shiny things in our own life, and learn to let them go.

Interestingly one of the other of the very few sermons I can remember being preached was preach from the pulpit of this church by Brian Green, Vicar of this parish in the mid-1990s when I started going to church. And he preached on today's gospel reading. I can't remember whether it was an Ash Wednesday sermon, or if the reading had just

come around in the usual course of Sunday worship. But what I do remember is that he was preaching from a different translation, and the final line of the gospel reading, in whatever translation that was, rather strikingly was rendered, "Jesus said 'nor do I condemn you. Go your way, and leave your life of sin.'" Go your way, and leave your life of sin. When you get home grab a couple of Bibles off your shelf, and see whether you've got a translation that says that.

If we are thinking about the shiny things that entrap us, things that slow us down in our spiritual life, that ensnare us, and if we are listening out for the voice of Christ, during this Lenten season that now stretches before us, six and a half weeks, 40 days and 40 nights, or 46 if you count the Sundays, listening out for that voice that appeals to us to leave our life of sin, what do we notice from today's gospel?

Well, we notice that it is our attitude to other people that is often at the heart of the problem. We can look so hard at what other people are doing that we forget to look at ourselves. The Pharisees are not wrong that according to the law of Moses adultery is to be condemned. There it is in the Ten Commandments. Number seven. Their problem was that they had stopped examining themselves. Jesus's challenge to them, 'whichever one of you who is without sin, you throw the first stone', is an invitation self-examination. It's an interesting gospel reading, isn't it, because Jesus is actually quite passive. Mostly doodling in the dust. And he just lets them work it out. Oh yes. I see myself. Perhaps I'll just pop this rock down, and quietly go home. Notice, too, that it's the eldest that go first. So there's something there about the fact that we have to grow up. We are called to mature, in our Christian lives. That we have the capacity to learn. Hopefully, year by year, lent by Lent, as we are invited to look closely into the glass decanters laid along *our* path, to begin to recognise the shiny things that have the capacity to trap us most easily, that slow us down, and have us dragging along a great dead weight, we can test our metal, we can hone our spiritual lives, we can learn to look at ourselves, before dragging somebody else's inadequate spiritual life out into the light and expecting to be praised for it.

Jesus, writing in the dust, looks up at his battered creation, his broken church, and invites us to go our way, and leave our life of sin. And so the invitation this Ash Wednesday, as the wheel of the year turns and we enter another Lent, is to allow Christ to write with dust on us. The ash that, if you would like, will be imposed on your forehead in a moment or two is made from last year's palm crosses. The ash is made of the cross. Everything is made of the cross. And the cross is God's love letter to the world. So the ash is made of love. And as we receive it we are reminded of our frailty, our fragility, our mortality, our failure, our tendency to drag other people in front of God, while forgetting to examine ourselves. But we are reminded of all those things, as we need to be every year, by receiving the shape of a Cross, made out of crosses used last year on the way to Easter. So yes, we are dust. But we are dust that is loved by God. Dust that is inches from glory.

There's a misprint in the order of service. During the imposition of ashes, for some reason it in our book it says 'turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel'. Now there's nothing particularly wrong with that, but the actual words that the church has used for centuries is, 'turn away from sin and be faithful to *Christ*.' It is Christ's eyes that we look into, as he straightens up from writing in the dust and invites us to leave our lives of sin. So I'm going to use those words today. As we move now into an extended period of confession, deliberately more detailed and slower than usual, we ponder the shiny things in our path we might want to take the opportunity this Lent to let go of, to slide our hand out of the jar and be free again. We recognise that none of us are without sin, we take a breath, we look inside, and then we stand up again, we stand before Christ as he straightens up, writes on us with the promise of the cross, tells dust this is loved by God to go our way, and leave our lives of sin.