

# *Pray, Fast Give*

*Ash Wednesday*

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Today is Ash Wednesday, so called because of the ancient practice of beginning the penitential season of Lent, with the placing of Ashes on the head as the sign of repentance. Reflecting back to Old Testament images of sackcloth and ashes reflecting sorrow and repentance. It was a traditional time of preparation for the catechumens, the candidates for admission to the church through baptism. For the forty days before Easter, they had an opportunity to reflect on their life, and the grace offered to them through the death and resurrection of our Lord.

But what does this mean for us today?

One of the interesting things about having Ben and Jess as part of our congregation is that their coming from a different church background means that nothing is able to be assumed. The things that we take for granted are quite new to them and it has meant for me the need to think about the habits that 40+ years of Anglicanism. They are not letting me go through the motions of the church year without pausing to think about what each season means. And this is a good thing, for our biggest danger is to continue to go through the motions and forget why these things are important. Symbolism is out of touch if the symbols have lost their meaning.

Likewise, the placing of Ashes on your forehead is of little use unless it reflects a genuine sorrow at our failings, yours and mine, and a genuine intention to do something about them.

Our reading from Matthew describes three essentials of the Christian and religious life: prayer, fasting and giving. Jesus says - when you pray..., when you fast..., when you give... and not if you pray..., if you fast..., if you give... Lent is about these things and give us an opportunity to put them into practice. It is our response to our shortcomings and part of the way to do something about it, for through prayer, fasting and giving, we can draw closer to God and find out more about who he wants us to be.

So let us reflect briefly on each of these activities:

**PRAYER** - Much can be said and much is written about prayer and praying. At least at one point in our life, we will feel that we are inadequate in this area and so there is ready market for books on prayer. I know I have preached in the past and will do so in the future about it, but I often wonder if we have sought to make it more complicated than it need be.

Certainly, we begin as children with the impression that prayer is about asking for things - God bless mummy, God bless Daddy... and I am sure that you will have heard from the pulpit that prayer is about listening to God. And these two opposing concepts are certainly elements of prayer. But perhaps we need to just think of it as spending time with God.

I remember when I was younger and the prospect of going out with new people had in it the implication of running things to talk about. Certainly this is a worry on the

first date. But those of you who have been married for quite some time will affirm that there is always something to talk about. And when there isn't, just being in each other's presence is enough.

In prayer, we talk to and listen to God and enjoy his company and in the spending time with him, we are changed, to be like him, in the same way that husband and wife grow alike in the way they think and view the world. In our relationship with God, spending time together encourages us the view the world through his eyes. As we become like him and see the world through his eyes, we are better able to be his people in the world.

**FASTING** - There is no merit in the voluntary abstinence from food. Just because we fast does not make us Godly. Indeed some people fast for their own glory, to say look at me, how godly I am. Indeed fasting in itself is not religious, although we often look at it in that way. I remember visiting someone and when they asked me if I would like a meal, I replied that I was fasting the response was amazing. It was like I was on a higher religious plane all of a sudden. I did manage to convince her that I was not eating lunch that day, as I had had a late breakfast and was looking to an early tea, and that someone my size could probably miss a meal without any danger. My day was busy and that I would probably not have time to eat and there was nothing religious in it. I now just say no to avoid explanation

Fasting in the religious sense is not about the absence of food but the opportunity that the absence can bring us. Time spent eating and preparing food can be turned over to God and for his purposes. Putting aside our pursuit of the sensual pleasures can enable us to pursue God. Fasting is about removing the distractions in our lives that prevent us on focusing upon God.

**GIVING** - We must take care that we do not give with the sense that there is some sort heavenly pay back. Many of us are materially blessed and many here are generous, but it is from a position of abundance. In Africa, there were many who were poor who like the widow, gave all they had and taught Louise and I through this.

Perhaps this is the clue, to see what we have as God's for God's purposes and make it available to him. We are privileged to handle some of God's resources. Giving is a reminder of our receiving and in most cases liberates God into action. This partnership between God and ourselves focuses us on his work and purposes and his care for the poor and the needy.

So this Lent, let us spend time with him, remove the distractions and make available God's resources for his work. This is not a tradition, but an opportunity to meet with God in a new and exiting way.

**AMEN**