

Ash Wednesday 2018
Isaiah 58.1-12 Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

So. The classic question at this time of year. What are you giving up for Lent?

Until fairly recently, I think most people would have offered some kind of answer to that question, whether it be meat, or alcohol, or biscuits, or cake. Lent would have been very generally seen as a time of giving things up and going without a treat or luxury. I suspect however that that has changed, and that for far fewer people today will be viewed as the beginning of a season of fasting. In part, that is because in the wider world other times of abstinence have come to the fore; many will have only just emerged from "dry January" or even "Veganuary", a kind of detox after the indulgence of Christmas. Fasting as preparation for a feast is harder for people to get their heads round than going on a diet as recovery from excess. Meanwhile, within the churches, "giving things up" is often now seen as second best to "taking things on"; reading a Lent book, attending a Lent course, giving time or money to a good cause.

In many ways, that more positive approach to Lent is to be welcomed, and I certainly would encourage you to take on those things and make the most of the opportunities Lent offers. But the "taking things on" line can be pushed too far. I was once involved in a church in which the profusion of Lenten activities was so great, and the expectation to participate so high, that far from being a time to de-clutter life and have time for reflection, Lent just became a season of additional business. In that setting, when I was asked what I was giving up for Lent, I was strongly tempted to answer, "I'm giving up religion".

Giving up religion for Lent is probably not an option for a Vicar; but behind the joke, our Bible readings for Ash Wednesday would suggest that there may be a serious point in there. Both the prophecy recorded in the Book of Isaiah and the words of Jesus spoken on the Sermon on Mount point to the dangers of religion, and religious practices, when treated as ways of demonstrating our own righteousness or godliness.

The practice of fasting, of going without food or drink for a temporary period in order to devote oneself to prayer, can be a helpful and godly thing; but our readings show how easily it can descend into an empty show. Let your fasting be between you and God, says Jesus. Let your fasting be one that brings justice into a society in which some go hungry not from choice but from deprivation and inequality, declares the prophet. If your religion is merely a device to make you feel better about yourself, and better than other people, then you probably should give up religion, and not just for Lent.

And of course all that feeds into and chimes with the generally negative view of the words "religion" and "religious". John Humphries, the BBC presenter, has argued that the wording of the census should be changed from "What religion are you?" (which assumes that they have one, even if a possible answer is "None") to "Are you religious?" But I'm not convinced

that's a fair question either; I'm not sure how many people, including believers, would really want to describe themselves as being "religious".

Increasingly, people will say, when asked, that they see themselves not as religious but as spiritual. "Spiritual" is a word that doesn't have those negative overtones, of a hypocritical, outward display of piety, or of conformity to an organised system, but rather sounds much more personal, inward, genuine.

So if Lent is not a time to become extra religious, is it a time to work on becoming more spiritual? If that means devoting more time to prayer, to reflection, to the things of God, then yes. But I'm not really any more convinced by the word 'spiritual' than by the word 'religious'; it can just stand for a vague, individualistic and private piety that makes no tangible difference to our lives or to the world around us. Even worse, it can feed the long-standing error of thinking of ourselves as essentially spiritual beings, pure souls, trapped for a time in a physical shell. Our bodies are viewed not as an aspect of our real selves but as a dispensable and often annoying casing. It feeds a dangerous attitude in which our bodies are at best ignored and at worst despised.

Ash Wednesday teaches us a different truth. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". We are created as material, mortal, bodily creatures, into which God has breathed the breath of life. That is not something to fight against, but to embrace, as an ultimately comforting and liberating truth. We don't have to rise above the limitations of our bodies, but accept them, with humility and thankfulness.

So, for Lent, don't try to be extra religious. Don't try to be super spiritual. Neither of those things are expected of us by God, who loves us as we are. Just be honest, be humble, be human. Seek to be faithful in following Christ and in wanting to love him more. Be kind, to others and to yourselves. And if you want to give something up, that's fine; but just don't boast, and don't beat yourself up if you fall. God knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust. And that's fine. God can do wonderful things with dust and ashes.