

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2021**  
**Ash Wednesday**

**Collect**

Holy God,  
our lives are laid open before you:  
rescue us from the chaos of sin  
and through the death of your Son  
bring us healing and make us whole  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

## Sermon by John Richardson

Perhaps you have decided that Lent is a time when you should do without something - something as simple as sugar in your coffee or that glass of wine you look forward to in the evening. Traditionally, Lent is a time when we are encouraged to give something up, to go without it, to make ourselves feel deprived of something we feel we really cannot do without for most of the time.

How much that we regard as necessary and even essential to our lives can we really do without? Lent is a time to look at our priorities - at the things we regard as being important and the things we think are not so important - and perhaps even coming to the conclusion that we may have got things the wrong way round. It is an opportunity to examine our lives and to ask ourselves; 'What things can we really do without?' To ask ourselves what we can do without means asking ourselves what should take the place of those things.

One thing we will have to do without is a cross marked on our foreheads this Ash Wednesday. For me it has always been a particularly significant moment. We are marked with the sign of the cross, first at our baptism, then on other occasions such as times of sickness, and every year on Ash Wednesday. So we carry the sign of the cross with us wherever we go, whatever we do. It is there and it cannot be removed. It is there for life.

The sign of the cross tells us that we are followers of the man who ended his life on the cross. It tells us that if we choose to follow him then we too must carry our own cross - whatever that might mean for us. What it will mean, if we remind ourselves each day that the cross is still there - is to tell us that we are called to live a life of service and commitment to the idea that we can make a difference in the world, and that putting love into practice is the one thing that will make a difference.

So, paradoxically, the cross becomes a symbol of love. It tells us that whilst all the opposite things to love led to the cross, the cross is actually an incredible manifestation of love. God so loved the world.....

Lent is a time for us to think where we might be without that love; to ask ourselves if we sometimes take that love for granted or perhaps do not even think about it. What are the consequences of being without love? What happens when we reject it or refuse to believe it is there? What difference does it make to our lives?

In today's Gospel we hear about those who need to be seen to be doing the right things - or what they consider to be the right things. It is clear to us that they need to look at what they are doing and why. We can see straight away that this is an example of people being more concerned about themselves and their image than they are about the needs and concerns of others. We can see that their display of piety and holiness is actually the opposite to what God requires. The things they consider to be important are the very things we think they should be without - self-importance, attention seeking, pride, the praise of others, a feeling of superiority.

In thinking about being without things, I was reminded of a book written by Sam Wells entitled *A Nazareth Manifesto*. In his book he explores the idea of "being with". For him one of the most important words for the Christian and discipleship is the word "with". Whilst Christians should be involved in the affairs of the world, this should not be at the expense of being "with" people. We

intervene in people's lives and impose our ideas and ways on them and forget that we are called to walk alongside them in their distressed and disadvantaged circumstances. We may be so concerned to meet their practical needs that we overlook their need for love and understanding.

We do not know what Jesus did for the larger part of his life, except that he almost certainly spent most of his life in Nazareth simply being with people, sharing their hopes and their concerns. We too need to spend time being alongside people, walking with them and sharing their concerns, their hopes, their anxieties, their fears. If this pandemic has taught us one thing, it is surely the importance of doing just that - of being with people. If not in person, then in prayer and love.

The pandemic has also brought home to us in a very forceful way what it means to be without certain things: the companionship of our friends and loved ones; the ability to respond to their needs and concerns; the freedom to be together in love and friendship; the joy of worshipping together and sharing our faith with others; the feeling of being without so many of the things that make our lives worthwhile.

Why not use this Lent to make a list of the things that you really cannot do without. I suspect that somewhere near the top of that list will be the word "love". I hope this will lead you on to think about what that means in your life - the love we have for each other, the love we give and the love we receive. Perhaps most of all you will think about the love God shows for us in Jesus and his journey to the cross.

Amen.