

## Homily – Ash Wednesday (Year A)

18 February 2026 Derby Cathedral

Isaiah 58.1-12 Psalm 51.1-18 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10 Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

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This year Ramadan and Lent have converged and are starting alongside one another. Muslims and Christians are beginning their holy seasons at the same time and will be marking them according to their respective traditions. The observance of these two seasons feature the three acts of piety about which Jesus teaches us in today's gospel; charity or alms giving, prayer and fasting. These are activities Jesus assumes will be part of our life; his focus is not on if we do them but on how we do them.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim year and is believed to be the month in which the Qur'an was given to humankind. Our Muslim neighbours keep it as one of the key pillars of Islam by observing a strict fast from dawn to sunset, joining in additional prayer and with zakat, charitable giving. As we have noted these are the three things highlighted in our gospel. It is notable that many Muslims who are not routinely devout keep Ramadan with great care. This is helped by the fact that life in the family and in the wider community is geared to the observance of Ramadan; family and friends will be eating and praying at the same time. After a day of fasting a Muslim joins with others to break the fast with iftar, the post-fast meal. Because your family and community are observing Ramadan you are supported in your own observance. This is why many Muslims see Ramadan as a spiritual boost rather than a burden or a dry set of rules to be obeyed.

By contrast, Lent in Western churches has become much more individualistic. We have abandoned the wider fast kept in Eastern Orthodox traditions which involve keeping a vegan diet and no alcohol. We carefully choose our Lenten activities and decide to read a particular book, or give up sweets or give up watching something on TV. It is all a bit random and somewhat genteel. And while the church offers us a particular pattern of liturgy and lays on a Lent Group we have far less of the communal or corporate feel than our Muslim friends enjoy.

In an essay on Ash Wednesday the Dean of Westminster, David Hoyle, suggests that we have lost a sense of the seriousness of sin. He writes, "Our smudge of ash

on Ash Wednesday is the last echo of a former seriousness: a whisper on the breeze that sin and reconciliation might be an issue.” This is echoed in the wonderful *Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete* a long prayerful meditation which has been set to music by John Tavener. The words and music combine wonderfully to emphasise both the seriousness of sin and God’s eagerness to forgive us:

“Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of all,  
Take from me the burdensome collar of sin,  
And, as Thou art compassionate grant to me  
Forgiveness of trespasses.”

And so as David Hoyle continues, “Ash Wednesday, then, should not be focussed on beginning Lent, or on declarations of intent – fewer chocolate hobnobs and more prayers, Ash Wednesday should be focussed on repentance.”

When we repent of sin we give up certain behaviours and take up different ones and today’s gospel helps us see some of the ways we can do this through our charity, our prayer and our fasting.

Charity in the broadest sense is about loving our neighbour, whether through giving money, giving of our time for example by visiting someone in need or doing something to help another. And yes, Jesus reminds us to do these things discreetly and without a fanfare. But in breaking out of our individualistic mindset charity might involve taking action to put right things that are wrong in our world by, for example, pressing our MP for action to provide for those who are vulnerable or by campaigning, even demonstrating, to end a particular wrong in the world. The pursuit of justice is a corporate expression of charity.

Prayer needs to be at the heart of our life as disciples. Jesus encourages us to pray on our own and out of public gaze. Yes, this involves laying our concerns before God and our intercession for those in need. But it is also about waiting upon God in stillness, not heaping up empty phrases thinking that we will be heard because of our many words. In silence we allow God to infuse our inner being with his goodness. Listening as well as speaking is important in any relationship, not least with God. God already knows our needs but also wants us to open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit. This type of prayer relates strongly to repentance as it is about us changing, helping us to live in a different way. And while this is personal prayer it is never private prayer because we are always part of the whole church across time

and place, part of the communion of saints on earth and in heaven. Both our worship in church and our personal prayer have a strong corporate element.

Fasting too can have its place. It is after all the unchosen norm for so many people around the world. But it can be beneficial when it is freely embraced with moderation and in appropriate ways. This might be about eating less or missing a meal. The pangs of hunger can remind us not just of our physical hunger but also of our need for spiritual nourishment. As the anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counsel* puts it “God is the essence of your soul, as your soul is the essence of your body; therefore, just as the soul is more valuable than the body, so the union of the soul to God by the heavenly food of love is far more valuable than the union of the body to the soul by any earthly food in this life. Feeding your body healthy food is a good thing to do, but if you don’t nourish your soul also, it will be forever hungry. Do both, then, but remember that feeding your soul is most important.” And Isaiah points out, fasting is about more than food but about giving up other wrongs, like oppressing our workers. More pertinently, and as Pope Leo has reminded us, this may be about giving up harsh words about another. Again, silence is the better option.

Lent is a blessing from God that encourages us to repent of the sin that blights our lives and to establish new patterns in our Christian living. Charity, prayer and fasting provide a key focus to help us express our discipleship in concrete ways mindful of Jesus words to do these with integrity rather than for show. This Lent we are encouraged to take sin seriously and repent of it and eagerly accept the ready forgiveness offered by God, and freed from that sin lead new lives marked by love of God and neighbour.

As we begin our Lenten journey we pray in the words of St Ephraim of Syria:

*O Lord and master of my life! a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition and idle-talking, give me not.*

*But rather, a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience and charity, bestow upon me Thy servant.*

*Yea, my king and Lord, grant me to see my own failings and refrain from judging others: For blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen.*