

Christ Church Freemantle Wednesday 17th February – Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is traditionally the day when we burn last year's Palm Crosses and use the ashes to remind ourselves of our mortality and our weak and sinful nature. As the mark of the cross is made on our foreheads we hear the words:

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return;
Repent and believe the Gospel.*

This year there are no Palm crosses to burn as by last Palm Sunday we were all in the first lockdown. I wonder if you followed Eileen's suggestion last year to make a cross of your own? We did, gathering twigs from the garden and tying them with purple wool to make a cross each – but I suspect the wouldn't make such good ashes as palm leaves! So today we have to content ourselves with a prayer (the Collect for Ash Wednesday) as we begin our Lenten journey:

*Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*



But with that prayer we begin the season of Lent, committing the next six weeks to preparing ourselves for the festival of the Resurrection, by sorting out our lives a bit and thinking about what following Christ really means to us. In six weeks it will be Good Friday then Easter Day – important days which are worth preparing for.

Why six weeks? We are told that after his baptism Jesus went off into the desert to spend forty days getting ready to tell everyone the good news of God's kingdom. He didn't do it by reading books or getting qualifications, but by living very simply indeed, and letting God lead him into those areas he needed to think about. (Our forty days have become stretched - Sundays are days when we can relax any Lenten fasting!)

And just as Jesus did we need no elaborate equipment with us – indeed this year we have to make the journey very simply - on our own without even being beside each other in worship, and perhaps this year it will feel more of a desert experience for us than usual. All we need is something to help us walk in the right direction – a compass if you like – something that points us God-wards. And what better compass than our cross? Hold it flat and it becomes a pointer, pointing towards God's love and at the same time pointing backwards towards ourselves. We

have to be honest with God about who we are and how we are thinking and feeling; that's the only way the compass will guide us aright.

When Jesus spoke about the cost of discipleship, he was talking from personal experience; he'd been through his desert experience. Committing ourselves to God's service isn't easy – we'd all rather prefer to do what WE want rather than listen to what God wants of us. But the truth is that God wants our real selves, and can't work with us until we are willing to share everything about us with him, our hopes, our misgivings, our embarrassments, the things we are ashamed of, the things we are afraid of.

This is why we all need a desert – time to be alone with God. The desert is honesty, and we need to get used to its bare and uncompromising landscape, where conflicts will face us and we are challenged. But if we do allow that honesty and challenge within ourselves, we shall emerge stronger and more integrated for God's service.

So give yourself time on these weeks to be alone with God, regularly, every day. It doesn't matter when, but try to keep the same time each day. Be silent, be still – allow him to talk to you; make a good Lent.

And when Easter comes Christ's resurrection light will shine into the darkest of corners.

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