

Reflection for Ash Wednesday 2024

In the Lent brochure – (see the Church website'; hard copies at the back of Church if you don't yet have one) – the introduction is entitled 'Welcome, dear feast of Lent'. The words are George Herbert's, the 17th century poet-priest. And he employs a striking pun. We might have expected, 'Welcome, dear *fast* of Lent', but for 'fast' we get '*feast*'. Of course, this year, Lent has been quick in the coming. We have hardly had time to get Christmas, Epiphany and Candlemas and all that eating and drinking out of our system. We think of Lent as welcoming Spring but it still feels like the icy grip of winter. And yet, perhaps we can welcome and embrace Lent because we long to embrace the Spring, the lengthening of days. We welcome Lent, not out of some misguided desire to beat ourselves up spiritually, but for the simple reason, that in the round of the times and seasons of the Christian year, this is a journey on which we must embark – the long walk with Christ to the Cross and into the dawning splendour of the eternal Day inaugurated in Joseph of Arimathea's garden. Lent, if we take it seriously, can be a spiritual *feast* as well as a time, at least in aspects of our life, to fast – to cut down, to moderate. Fasting says to us – don't live a monochrome life; there is a time to fast and a time to feast.

I would like us to reflect on the words of the Collect for Ash Wednesday:

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, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This collect was newly written for the 1549 Prayer Book, though it draws on the old Roman prayer for the blessing of ashes. Its opening paraphrases some words not from the Old Testament, but from the collection of books we call the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 11:

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things,
and you overlook the sins of mortals that they may repent,
for you love all things that exist,
and you hate nothing of all the things that you have made,
for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.

This has to be the starting point for us. Like Herbert's feast for fast, here hate is mentioned in order to draw us to love. You *hate nothing* that you have made; you *love everything* that you have made. We need to hear afresh the great and wonderful truth that we are held in the love of God; not only that God is love, but that God loves us, each of us, all of us.

Lent is a penitential season. Our sins are real, and at the start of Lent especially, and the weeks to follow, are a summons to recognise that sin is sin, in all its ugliness and wilfulness. It spoils; it degrades. But God does not hate us because of it. Rather he calls us to penitence. He doesn't mete out instant judgment upon us, but gives us time; time to repent, time for amendment of life; time to come back to our senses; time to allow his love to overcome our foolishness. But I want you to note that the collect also witnesses to God's prevenient action. Echoing Psalm 51 and Ezekiel 36, it asks *God* to create and make in us new and contrite hearts. In Psalm 51 the request for is for a clean heart. This is a very profound gift of grace, a gift we rightly covet. New, clean, contrite – contrition, which comes from a root meaning 'bruised' or 'crushed' has the sense of true sorrow, and it springs from a revelation of God's holiness. This is what enables us to see sin as sin. Only then that we can we *worthily* or truly or appropriately lament our sins and recognize our unworthiness. For it is only when something new and clean becomes spoiled and defaced that we see accurately the reality of our fallen condition. And as we apprehend God's loving judgment, so we are able truly to embrace his all-pervasive mercy and so receive the miracle of forgiveness.

'Welcome dear feast of Lent'. I picture a banqueting table. On it are beautifully crafted vessels, each one so expensive, so costly, so perfectly wrought. The vessels are full to over-flowing; the delights and delicacies within them are the fruits of forgiveness, salvation, life, hope, joy, holiness. They are mouth-watering, because we recognise our hunger and thirst for this rich fare.

The Beloved in the Song of Songs, that Old Testament poem that speaks of Easter joy and delight, when the rain has gone, when the time for singing has come, says of the Lover, 'he led me into his banqueting house and his banner over me is love'. So, we conclude where we began; enveloped by the love of God. May this Lent be such a feast – to quote Herbert again, 'a feast that mends in length'; in other words, that a feast simply gets better and better.

