

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Today, Ash Wednesday, we enter the most important time of the church year. The Lent/Easter cycle is centered on the celebration of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the season of Lent prepares us for that celebration. Lent begins with a cross of ashes on the forehead and ends at the foot of the empty tomb.

As the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, "The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting" (BCP, p. 264). The season of Lent invites us to prepare for Easter by examining our lives, rediscovering who we are and who God calls us to be.

After being baptized by John in the River Jordan, Jesus went alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, we Christians are invited to ask, one way or another, what it means to be ourselves. At the end of the forty days of Lent, having been drawn back to the basics and renewed in our faith and understanding, we recommit ourselves to God's plan and purpose by renewing our baptismal promises as we celebrate the Easter Feast.

We begin Lent with Ash Wednesday's reminder of our mortality, "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (BCP, p. 265). These words and the action of placing a cross of ashes on our foreheads is intended to remind us that we are not little gods but God's creatures. When we forget that fundamental fact, we can get ourselves into a lot of trouble.

In the gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us against false piety – doing the right things for the wrong reasons. The traditional acts of Jewish piety, almsgiving, fasting and prayer were meant to be integral to one's relationship with God, not public demonstrations. Those who do good deeds to be seen by others already have their reward. But those who act in private, do what is right for God's sake in response to grace received, and not to gain praise from others, will receive their reward from God.

Our gospel lesson today shows that Jesus was looking for a change of heart rather than a change of diet. Now which is harder: to change our diet for forty days, or to change our heart? Which is likely to be more lasting?

We have the forty days of Lent to be honest with ourselves, to be real with God and not afraid of our shortcomings. By God's grace we can learn to live more honestly, more fully by acknowledging our sinfulness and allowing God who loves us to forgive and transform us.

Lent is a time for personal housecleaning and recommitment to the new life in Christ we entered in baptism. The Lenten journey is our opportunity to take stock of the joys and sorrows of our lives, noting the things for which thanks should be offered, and the things that require us to make amends. It is a time for asking ourselves if we are becoming the person we want to be and, more importantly, are we becoming the person God wants us to be?

At all times, and especially during the season of Lent, when winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance, we are challenged to reflect on what is of most value in our lives. As Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:21).

Resources: William Bergman, 2012; Synthesis, 2017; Frederick Buechner, *From Death to Life*, 1991.