

Sunday Before Lent 2012 – St Matthew's

+*In nomine...*

Normally clergy start banging on about the business of Lent and how to observe it on Ash Wednesday, or even on the first Sunday of Lent, but I like to start before that – lucky you! That is because by the time we get to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we need to have given the matter some thought *already* and made some decisions. So, let's have a think about Lent.

When I was a College Chaplain I used to have an enormous party on Shrove Tuesday. The deal was that anything you had pledged to give up for Lent, the Chaplain would provide at the party for you to enjoy one last time before your long period of abstinence. Students would email me whatever it was they had decided to forgo and the usual suspects would always be on the list – biscuits, chocolate, beer, coffee – but also, there

were always, some more particular items. I recall, specifically: pork pies, Battenburg cake, and rocky road chocolate and marshmallow squares from Marks and Spencer. And then there were the canny ones: 'Chaplain, I'll be giving up Veuve Cliquot champagne, but not other types of champagne...'!

The aim of the party, *obviously*, was to enable the students to over-indulge to such an extent that even those in the prime of youth would have a sense of their own frail mortality when they awoke the next morning and therefore come willingly to chapel on Ash Wednesday to repent in dust and ashes. It was a remarkably successful strategy.

What, though, is the point of all this. Traditionally Lent is a time for being miserable and bad tempered because you have willingly deprived yourself of the very thing that helps you get through the day, be that chocolate, fags or whatever. In a society which leans evermore

towards instant gratification and excess, such restraint and abstinence are in themselves helpful and healthy disciplines and there's the added bonus that giving up cakes and booze may also enable you to save a bit of cash and lose a bit of weight... but is that all there is to it....?

Lent is a time for *growing closer to God*. It is a time to re-focus and to deepen our spiritual lives.

That does not speak to me of deprivation, but of opportunity, of challenge, of invitation.

Lent is an invitation. An invitation by God, to get to know him better. But to do that we have to do the kinds of things we would have to do to get to know anyone better: spend a bit more time and effort on the relationship and remove the distractions. This is what those ominously named 'Lenten disciplines' help us to do.

What are they? The church points us towards a number of things. I have

already mentioned fasting. This helps us with dependency; things we use as a crutch. We give them up because we resolve to depend on God and when we miss them, it is a tangible reminder to us that it is *God* who sustains us and not these external things.

Prayer is another pillar of Lent. Prayer seems a bit obvious, but it doesn't have to be hard or dull - there are lots of ways of doing it: be creative. Not all of us have the time or temperament to sit for an hour in blessed silence contemplating the sacred mysteries. Choose one prayer that you will say every day in Lent... or write one. Or decide that you will say a prayer every time you boil the kettle or empty the dishwasher - just a quick one: 'Lord, I'm busy today but thank you for being with me'. You might decide, if you can, that you will come to morning prayer once a week, or even just once, in Lent.

Learning is another traditional feature of Lent: reading, reflecting, study. Perhaps

decide that you will read something: a Christian book, or a book of the bible, or just a psalm. Come to a lecture, or a bible study, or a Saturday morning session and participate in something that will help you learn more about God.

Giving is third Lenten discipline and that is because giving moves us beyond ourselves and is a concrete way of showing concern for others. Why not think about supporting a particular charity this Lent – anything you like, anything that moves you?

And penitence, sorrow, forgiveness – these are features of Lent. We tend to shy away from them. They're not cool in our society; after all, we've never been wrong, we're never weak or vulnerable... But of course we are, and Lent is a time we can admit that we really are fallible (or to put that in theological terms, a sinner), and ask God to help us get back on the right track (or to put that in theological terms, repent), so that we can

love God and those around us in a more genuine and generous way.

Opportunity, challenge, invitation. You have three days. Think about what you will do to make this Lent different. It's your personal response to God's invitation to draw nearer to him in these forty days. To turn up your commitment by at least one notch on the dial. Not your commitment to the church, or the community, but to God – that's what really matters. I guarantee that God will meet you more than half way. So think about what you will do and what you will forgo. Commit to that, and then come to church on Easter Day and thank the God you now know much better for his amazing love and commitment to you.

Oh, and don't forget that after the forty days of fasting for Lent, there are *fifty* days of feasting for Eastertide. +Amen.