

Ash Wednesday
Fr Jarred Mercer

*'Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct
something
Upon which to rejoice'*

As TS Eliot reminds us in his famous and complex poem 'Ash Wednesday', renunciation leads to rejoicing. In fact, it takes part in constructing something upon which to rejoice—a vessel, perhaps, in which rejoicing can abide.

Ash Wednesday, and all of Lent insofar as Lent is a forty-day dramatisation of the truths

of Ash Wednesday, is a formal renunciation of the illusion I live by that I own myself. It is an acknowledgement that my self is not an object of which I am free to take possession. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are not our own property.

Dispossession of self, self-renunciation, self-denial.

This is in one sense just what it means to be alive. To live is to always be moving beyond the self: that self that we think we are now holding onto, the self that we think we possess, or control. We are always letting go of that self, the self of this moment, and of this moment, and of this moment. The next breath, the next thought, the next touch, transforms. To live is to live by dispossession. Always moving, always changing—always moving back, returning towards the dust.

Self possession, or self-assertion, is a useless attempt to settle for ourselves now as if now is all we are; it is, as Herbert McCabe has it, 'failure to take the risk of living'.

So the reality check of Ash Wednesday, the practice of Lent, dispossession of the self, renunciation, is simply what it means to live a human life. Acknowledgement of our mortality, of our mutability, of, perhaps, our instability and risk. We need to let go of ourselves to live. But we also need to let go because our self-assertion, our pretence of self-possession and control, leads to self-absorption, to selfishness, greed, pride, so much so that it turns out in the end that the self we were trying to possess and hold onto was not very desirable anyway! And so the panicked attempt to possess ourselves not only hinders us from genuine living, it causes us to live in shame.

So self-denial, dispossession, is about life, but also about the renewal of that life, opening us up to something new, to new possibilities, to a life not bound to shame, to self-hoarding and possession: making room for new life; making room for *Easter*.

This is our whole life, all year round, each day, but lent, and perhaps most vividly Ash Wednesday, directs our focus on this foundation, this 'something construct[ed] upon which to rejoice': dying to live, finding oneself by losing oneself, joy through contrition, happiness beyond shame.

Talk about dispossessing of ourselves, denying ourselves, or renunciation, is not about wallowing in a sense of utter uselessness or depravity. Lent is not about punishing yourself for being human or feeling as bad as

you possibly can about yourself. That would be deep down a further self-absorption, more focus on oneself, more turning inward in our narcissism. This is to ignore Christ's instructions about fasting and self-denial: wash your face, perk up! Stop drawing attention to yourself as if this were really just about you.

No, our renunciation, that true renunciation that turns toward rejoicing, is about turning outward towards others. This is why our lenten fast has another side: not only self-denial, but self-*giving*.

Lent traditionally consists of both fasting and almsgiving. These are symbols of the larger picture of our Christian life, of giving ourselves away. By fasting a bit, or giving something up for Lent as is often the practice today, we are certainly not then complete, as if

the job of learning to let go were finished. It is an active practice of a larger life project: on the job training, as it were.

The same goes for our almsgiving. No one is under the illusion that one's lenten giving is going to end world poverty. It is an active symbol that dramatises the entire life of the follower and friend of Jesus. Observing our lenten fast and almsgiving doesn't allow us to strike through items on a list as if they were finished tasks. We are being trained, learning to love, to give ourselves away. Lent is a path of learning—learning our mortality, learning our dependence, learning the cross; learning joy, learning rejoicing, learning Easter.

This short forty-day drama we are entering called Lent—the drama of death and resurrection, of our dispossession towards new life—is a picture of our whole life's movement.

Lent is an opportunity for us to sit, to be still, to lament awhile, in all the brokenness inside of us and around us, and to prepare ourselves, prepare our world, for the radical in-breaking of God's Easter love. Our self-dispossession in lent, our recognition that we are the people of the dust, is not a method of self-improvement, but a movement toward the renewal of all things.

We sit in the world's brokenness, we find ourselves among the broken, that we might become agents of renewal within it; that we might usher the world and all its laments into resurrection, into Easter, into new life.

Renunciation to rejoicing. Ashes to ashes.
Dust to dust to glory.