

Ash Wednesday 2021

Fr Peter Groves

“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites” Matt. 6.16

On this Ash Wednesday, I would like to emphasise just one thing about the Christian season of Lent, and it is this: Lent is not about being miserable. The eucharistic prayer which we use in Lent contains the words “each year you give us this joyful season, when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed.” The joy of which the liturgy speaks is not the self-satisfaction of the gloomy public pietist, which Jesus is so keen to condemn. It is the gift of God’s love in knowing that the prayer and devotion to which we are called are his chosen means for drawing us closer to the divine life.

Jesus condemns the hypocrites for their public self-righteousness, because he knows it is no righteousness at all. It is yet another example of the life which is

chiefly concerned to say “look at me, look at me”, when we ought all to be looking to God. We need to be aware that that same self-promotion can be part of our own inner dialogue. What I mean by this is that we can allow the voices of doubt and inadequacy to gnaw within us when we tell ourselves that we are never doing enough, that others are always better, when we allow guilt rather than love to dominate our Christian lives.

I joked on Sunday that the challenge this Lent would be to imagine our lives as more penitential than currently they already are. This was not entirely a joke. We are all undergoing events and circumstances which have taken a huge toll on the physical and mental health of our society. That is as true for people of faith as for everybody else – knowing the love of God in our lives does not mean we cease to be human. The worst thing we could do this Lent is to rejoice in misery, to heap more pressure on ourselves simply because we think that we ought to feel bad. Jesus’

command to fast in secret has never been more urgent than it is at the moment.

If you are looking for a Lenten discipline, ask yourself what discipline you already have. You may find that God will deepen it for you this Lent, will draw you closer to him through what is already there. If you choose a new rule of life, do not over burden yourself. There is no Christian virtue in attempting the impossible just for the sake of it. The will of God is that we should love ourselves, not reproach ourselves. And, most of all, if you are setting yourself an active task, let it be one which looks outward, towards the needs of others. Telephone or email one person each day, one person you would not otherwise contact, perhaps a person who is alone. Keep a prayer diary, listing a few people each day to remember before God. Or commit yourself to praying for our hospitals and our doctors and our emergency services and all those who are responding to need and to sickness.

The word Lent comes from a word which means Spring. It is a time of hope, of growth, and of positivity. Focusing on the cross of Christ is focusing on the love of God. And if thinking about the love of God makes us think we should be miserable, then there is something very wrong indeed.