



to start in Lent, go on your way

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. These words, spoken when we have the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, recall the words in Genesis, spoken to the first humanity when they are sent from the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are sent from the garden, to toil the earth, broken but not empty handed. They are sent with a promise of return:

“By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread until you return to the ground from which you were taken. For you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3.19).

The dust, the earth, the dirt to which they are promised to return in death is the garden soil where God had planted them. A promise of redemption and redemption. And today, the black ashes of Ash Wednesday take us on a forty-day journey that will end on Holy Week, with Jesus, in the soil of Gethsemane, the garden of Christ's suffering.

We set off on this journey of Lent, in prayer and reflection, with the promise of brokenness and the promise of return. We will allow ourselves to face our darkness and our need for repentance. Some of us will do this partly with some form of fasting.

The practice of fasting in Lent bring us into a kind of solidarity with Jesus, who spends forty days of fasting, of self-denial in the desert. And some of us intend to keep a spirit of abstinence by denying ourselves a favourite food, or wine, or sugary treats. cross the ages, Christians gave up meat for Lent. The fast symbolically recalls our hunger for God, our thirst for forgiveness, and need for repentance.

As Lent hymn tells it:

*Forty days and forty nights,
Shall not we your sorrow share
and from worldly joys abstain,
fasting with unceasing prayer,
strong with you to suffer pain?
Forty days and forty nights.*

Others resolve to take on an act of service, or something else that asks of our time and attention for the benefit of others. I think we miss the point if we think of Lent as time to catch up on healthy diet, perhaps a resolution made and forgotten at the turn of the New Year. The prayer in this evening's Eucharist liturgy speaks of something more sobering and promising than moderation in what we eat and drink.

For in these forty days you lead us into the desert of repentance that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may grow in grace and learn to be your people once again. Through fasting, prayer and acts of service Through study of your holy word you bring us back to your generous heart.

The poet puts it in the form of searching questions:

*Is this a Fast, to keep
The Larder lean?
No: 'tis a Fast to dole
Thy sheaf of wheat
And meat
Unto the hungry soul.
To circumcise thy life.
To show a heart grief-rent
And starve thy sin ...
(Robert Herrick, 17th c.)*

The Lenten fast is a call to face ourselves.

The South African writer, Adrian Leftwich, wrote the story of his betrayal of friends in 1960s Apartheid. He titled his story 'I Gave The Names'.

Fearing for himself during his arrest, Leftwich gave up friends and colleagues, all young twenty somethings, idealists campaigning against the regime as part of an underground organisation. Friends went to prison as a result, his best friend, for seven years; others served longer sentences. Those who could, left the country by whatever means they could. Leftwich escaped to England to try to rebuild a life as an academic.

Forty years later, he reflects on why it had taken him so many years to face his past. And he concludes, that to do so would mean facing the person he had tried to leave behind. The one who gave names. And because he knew that facing the twenty-four-year-old who not only gave names but testified in the courts against his friends would be to face a truth he could not bring himself face. He writes: *"I doubt I will ever really understand the inner history of my actions. We are all capable of self-deceit, especially when seeking to tell the truth."*

Here is what I find most compelling in the story of Jesus and the woman in our Gospel. Jesus doesn't condemn the woman. But neither does he soften the truth he is faced with; neither her past nor the sin of the men prepared to throw the stones escapes his gaze. They will not walk away without first facing themselves:

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."

In the Gospel, Jesus indulges no one's illusions. (He doesn't say to the woman, So long as it was between consenting adults and no one got hurt.) But neither does he allow her to wallow in self-pity. In fact, Jesus, as the Gospel tells it, "straightens up" and simply tells the woman to go on. Jesus gets up off the ground, and facing her and says, "Go, and sin no more."

Jesus will not allow her to collapse in crippling remorse and condemnation, nor to be devoured by guilt. She will not spend forty years of self-mortification. But having faced her accusers, Jesus sends her on her way, to go on, in a life that knows mercy, forgiveness, and grace: "Woman, neither do I condemn you: go on your way."

This is what Lent does for us: it draws us into forty days of reflection, prayer, and repentance so that, taking hold of God's mercy, we can learn to go on.

I am not much of a gardener, and our own gardener, [Catherine Tidnam](#), has patiently indulged my questions about houseplants I am often desperately trying to keep alive. One thing I've learned, and it may be the most important thing a gardener needs to know, is that the black soil, the humus of decayed organic material, is what makes possible life in the garden.

I pray today that the black ash of Ash Wednesday would be for us a humus to grow the seeds of repentance, the courage to face ourselves, and the humility we will need in Holy Week, when we come before Christ and his Cross to say

*Lord have mercy
Christ have mercy
Lord have mercy*

Amen.