



dear fellow sinners and miscreants...

Dear fellow sinners and miscreants: Welcome to Lent. May your renunciations of the season be so extreme as to properly purify you and make you acceptable in God's sight.

The Fund Raising Committee is pleased to announce that stocks of the hair-sweatshirts (with St James's logo) have sold out, as have the hand-knitted self-lacerating mittens. The Committee is urgently working on new products to help us fully enter into Lent's purpose, to be badged under the general heading (inspired by L'Oréal's strapline) of *Because You're Not Worth It*.

Of particular interest will be the range of face creams designed to promote boils and crow's feet. Not to be outdone, the clergy team has extended its range of in-house penances, and sacramental confession is now heard in the Bell Tower between five to and five past midday, so that the midday peal may remind you of the horror your sins arouse in heaven.

The Liturgy Group, wishing to make its own contribution to this season of penitence, has decided that the altar is to be made much bigger and higher, so as to emphasise that (a) not only are we "not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table" but also (b) that only the fit and strong may make it to God's Banquet.

Fair traded chocolate has, of course, been removed from the Tradecraft stall during Lent, and Ribena has replaced the Berry Brothers & Rudd Communion Claret.

Preachers have been instructed to extend their homilies to at least forty minutes and the Eucharistic Prayer has been lengthened. You should be home by tea time - tomorrow.

Welcome then to Lent: to a clichéd Lent of popular myth; a season of studied discomfort and po-faced renunciations; something of mild bewilderment to those outside the church. Watch (and learn) as we take something insightful and wise and mess it up rather by regulating it, trivialising it, distorting or mocking it. This, to some degree, is what we do to Lent.

The captured bird, once a beautiful thing flying free, becomes stripped of its essential character when adorning some living room from the confines of a cage, however well gilded. And the human spirit – yours and mine – such a wondrous and adventurous thing, becomes stripped of its essential beauty and character when living solely within the confines of clichéd behaviours and expectations.

We have – it seems – so many clichéd views about ourselves and our world that thinking and acting freely is a rare thing.

We have them about men and about women, about age and about background, about church and about religion, about politics and about community, about education and about what learning is, and about what constitutes health and wealth and beauty and right living.

Rousseau's much quoted observation that '*Man is born free, and everywhere... is in chains*' hits the mark only too well, for we live so much of the time bound by fictions of one kind or another. The price we pay for living amidst fiction is our freedom and authenticity. It's a common enough habit, but that church people should labour under this, well, that's a very strange thing. And in Lent, of all times.

Why? Because the Gospels, when we manage to engage with them attentively and as though freshly minted, summon us to grow up; to cast off the blinkers which restrict our field of vision, to stop thinking habitually, narrowly and in clichéd ways.

On Ash Wednesday last week you may have attended - here or elsewhere - an ancient liturgy to mark the start of Lent and which included the marking in ash on our foreheads of the sign of the Cross, to the words *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return; turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ*. I find it to be one of the most poignant and useful liturgies of the Christian year. It requires of us only this: to stand before God and to say laconically and straightforwardly *this is how it is with me*.

This gives us a hint of what penitence is about. No great, wordy, self-lacerating grovelling. No showy self-mortification. Never the trivial renunciations of chocolate or cappuccinos. Just an economy of words, *meant*; a spiritual and psychological nakedness; a desire to let all artifice fall away; an awareness of our mortality; a simple trust in our blessedness – in our counting for something in God's sight, as we heard of in Genesis.

Lent is a time for seeing and hearing what, usually, we hardly see, hardly hear.

So there is a different approach to Lent, different to the parodies of it we hold as much within the church as beyond it. And I'd love to be able to persuade you of it.

Lent is a wonderful time (as in full of wonder) not a fantastic time (as full of fantasy); heady with invitation and possibility and discovery and the mending of some fences and the breaking down of others; it is laconic, preferring silence and only necessary words to noise and chatter (inside the mind and without); it has the fecundity of pregnancy, of something full of life-giving promise being readied for birth. And all this is true whatever age or state we are in. It is not possible to be '*past child bearing years*' or the wrong gender for this kind of '*bringing to birth*', the kind God seeks in each part of so fertile a creation. Any infertility here is of our own making, our own imposition and choosing. Always there is freedom to choose: God does not go in for arm-twisting.

Lent is rich. A time for attending to the whispered assurances of a recklessly promiscuous and purposeful God whose essential nature is to delight in all that is.

So no hair-shirts, please. No self-laceration. No gloominess. No adding to the burdens that life dishes out in often excessive measure. Only as much honest self-knowledge as you can muster, in the context of your standing naked but not ashamed before God.

We are only just into Lent. It's not too late to climb aboard and make of it whatever you need to make of it to move beyond fiction to authenticity. There is no 'off the shelf' prescription for this; it has to be your own, though help is always at hand.

Along with other churches in Christendom, we've packed away our *Alleluias* and *Glorias*

and have pared down the liturgy and have set sail across what are meant to be deep waters until we reach landfall on Palm Sunday, then to make our way across some challenging terrain during Holy Week until we arrive at Easter Day when we loosen the liturgical corsets and let rip and celebrate Christ's resurrection and seek its meaning, not in some generic sense, *but its meaning for you, in the wondrous and precious circumstances of your life.*

Do any of us ever grasp fully the meaning of that? Mostly not. But we can enter the great adventure of seeking to grasp it. That may

require all sorts of things, including our own personal wildernesses and temptations, seasons of joy and times of repentance and a capacity to loiter with holy intent and desire.

And if personal experience and the testimony of others is anything to go by, it may also involve the periodic sense that God whispers to you – as Mark has God say to Jesus in this morning's Gospel – '*you are my child, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased*'.

Have an adventurous Lent.

Hugh Valentine