



this is how it is with me

Welcome to the season of Lent. *If you are relatively new to the church* you need to know that it is a season in which you are asked to step aside from the **usual** and to do things **differently**, so as to better enter the stories and claims we know as Holy Week and Easter.

If you've been round the liturgical track before and are far from new to these things, well, you too need to know that it is a season in which you are asked to step aside from the **usual** and do things **differently**, so as to better enter the stories and claims we know as Holy week and Easter.

Whatever group you are in, this is not as easy as it sounds and yet is also far easier than it sounds. The enemy is familiarity with the routine of our lives and minds. Familiarity gets in the way of more than just Lent, as maybe you know.

One theme with the Christian story is that we all come into this world heavily burdened by sin, 'original' sin as it is often described. Along with many others, I suspect that this is a harmful distortion of things.

Better, really, to think of 'original blessing'. Whatever your view on this we might also say that we each come into this world travelling light: a new, little body; a receptive, uncluttered and evolving mind; and a heart not yet acquainted with the woes and the joys that later come our way.

We arrive travelling light. But in no time at all we accumulate 'stuff', just as the once-new

hard drives on computers and the pristine hulls of new ships soon gather barnacles of one sort or another. The stuff we collect can slow us down, tease and confuse our minds, take the edge of living fully and freely in every astonishing moment of this astonishing adventure.

Computer hard drives can be cleaned and defragmented. Hulls can be scraped clean in dry dock. *But the human?* Now, that's harder. We are more complicated. Unlike a train which leaves one station behind and moves unencumbered to another, we carry with us our accumulated histories as well as any number of bogeymen. We carry the past with us into the present and beyond.

It's a bit like compound interest – that miracle of the once forbidden *usury* which over time causes money to grow like topsy. Our memories, and especially our anxieties and personal worries, can *compound* into ever-present barnacles, slowing us down in so many ways and making it much harder to live in the glorious, eternal ever-present moment.

If you think you are spared these disabilities, think again. I'm afraid it is almost the inescapable default position of the human animal.

But don't worry. There are symptomatic over-the-counter treatments of many kinds.

Drink and drugs of various concoctions are often resorted to but can't bring serious relief. (The drugs, by the way, range from

banned mind-altering chemical substances to the not-banned mind-altering things like competitiveness, gossip, worldly success, loveless eroticism, greediness and uncontrolled consuming).

Mindfulness, prayer, meditation can help us quieten our souls and restore some balance. So can some exercise, volunteering, music, community service, caring for one another, caring for ourselves. Even trauma in our lives can have the unexpected benefit of dislodging us from our narrow perspectives and helping us to see afresh, free of those barnacles and opinions and certitudes that so often only blind us.

May it be so with Lent. Whether your first or 50th, may it allow you – just a little – to see and experience things differently, freed from familiarity and the human burden of memory, worry and any number of other preoccupations. Think of Lent as like a *wormhole*: that hypothetical connection between widely separated regions of space and time (Star trekkers and sc-fi fans will know): slip into a new dimension.

We are about to transact together an ancient liturgy, which may help you find your Lenten wormhole. Ash Wednesday has nothing to do with wallowing in a disabling sense of sin. It has everything to do with realism about ourselves and our collective selves. It invites us to bring into conscious awareness those many ways in which we practice indifference rather than love – both as ‘me’ the individual and as the human race, this species to which we belong.

Ash Wednesday is - to Christian people - a day of penitence. It is a day when we can lower the mask and stop the energy-consuming business of justification, explanation, concealment and subterfuge

and instead simply stand before God and say ‘*this is how it is with me...*’.

The outward sign is the tracing of Christ’s Cross on our foreheads, using ash from last year’s Palm crosses, to the words God speaks to Adam (in Genesis): *remember you are dust and to dust you shall return*. It is an act of solidarity – for we affirm the mortality we share with all other people, animals and creation; it is an act of personal and collective acknowledgement – for we acknowledge that not all is well with us.

This isn’t just a personal thing, where we lament the harm we have done individually to others and to ourselves; it must also take in our collective harm-doing. And to that litany of unimaginable proportions there would seem to be no end. We are complicit by virtue of being part of the human family: complicit in war, poverty, injustices local and global, the shabby treatment of the vulnerable, oppression by colour and gender or sexuality, our spending on armaments, the practice of genocide, the grossly unequal distribution of wealth, the obsession with appearance, the pollution of our planet, the misuse of animals, our collective greed, obsessions and pursuits.

So in this outward ashing we say silently to God not only ‘this is how it is with me’ but also ‘this is how it is with us all, with my species, and in this I share responsibility’.

It may seem strange to be trying to sell to you this season we call Lent with little to recommend it but a facing up to our failings and complicity. And it would be if that was all there is to it. But remember, Lent serves the claims of Holy Week and Easter. Its aim is to clear away the obstacles that prevent us from entering the claims of the Gospel: that God exists and in the words of the first reading is “gracious and merciful, slow to

anger, and abounding in steadfast love”; that we are no accident but purposefully called into being; that in the life and death of the Rabbi Jesus – the Christ of faith – we are given access to what life means, with a fullness and depth we mostly fail to grasp.

Following Christ has never meant separation from the world but a new a better way of engaging with it. Sure, it has an aspect of detachment, but that is part of the marvel of it: a bit like the elements of attachment and detachment that characterise the best of our human relationships.

I hope you find your Lenten wormhole: a way of exploring a new dimension whilst remaining present in this one. It will not be frightening but may be challenging. Seek out any help or companionship you might need, and draw on the church – the community of faith – as you need to.

Psalm 51 – which we heard a little while ago contains that sublime petition which we sung as the response: *‘create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me’*. And this is what we ask of you, our God, as we gather here in your name. Amen.