

## HC Ash Wednesday 1 March 2017

Is 58:1-12; Ps 51:1-17; 2 Cor 5:20-6:10; John 8:1-11

### **PRAY**

This morning during the walk to school I was chatting to a Muslim lady who lives in the parish. As we talked I told her that today was the first day of our fast as Christians as we prepare for lent.

She knew about Easter but was unaware of lent. So, after I explained a bit she said “Ah like Ramadan.” Which made me wince. Wince because I am in constant awe whenever I speak to Muslims about fasting. They really know how to fast. I remember one year when Ramadan fell when the days felt particularly long my Muslim friend and local cafe owner Ali, in Brixton spent that year’s fast serving coffee, cakes and sandwiches with a friendly smile whilst himself fasting from all but water through the long daylight hours

and having to wake at about 2am in order to eat within the rules of Ramadan.

And I think we have much to learn from our Muslim neighbours about self-sacrifice, giving, study and prayer – the 4 classic elements of fasting for both Muslims and Christians. But I want to remind us today that our season of lent is not a fast for the sake of a fast. We do not give up, give out, seek and study as a religious exercise or to win God's approval.

Our season of lent is a gift intended to lead us into a new, deeper encounter with God.

Let me show you how this might work by using our Scripture readings from today's service:

In our first reading we had people confused because they were fasting but not getting the results they intended. They saw the fast as a form of negotiation.

“If I tidy my room – will you give me pocket money?”

“If I put in the extra hours, will you give me the promotion?”

“If I keep quiet, can we pretend this never happened?” or as in V 3 “Lord everyone can see we are starving here on purpose in this fast, so you will give us what we want? We are being really religious here but you don’t seem to be keeping your side of the deal.”

And God sees there is no real encounter with Him. And God says this is an “unacceptable offering.” Because their religion is totally unconnected to the way they live life.

God says “You are fighting among yourselves, oppressing your workers, exploiting the poor, eating while others are hungry, walking past the homeless without a care.”

Religion can easily be associated with traditions of worship but it comes with a simple definition in the letter to James

*“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

*James 1:27*

Or in a catchy phrase that Jesus used to sum up all that is important in life: Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourselves.

We will not encounter God this lent by putting on a show. But we will encounter God this lent when we are rightly religious by loving others especially the most vulnerable, as ourselves.

So then we said together the psalm of David which is his great psalm of repentance, after an act of adultery, most likely rape and finally murder of a friend, a neighbour and one over whom he had power. David has nowhere to go. He comes clean and the coming clean, quite rightly breaks his heart. So God is able to respond.

“I notice you, I see you, I recognize your heart shattered life as being ready for love and I can restore you.”

David encounters God because he has dethroned himself and invited God back into God’s rightful place.

Lent is a season for us all to dethrone ourselves as false god’s and put Jesus back as king of our lives.

Having Jesus as king in control often means walking some very difficult paths indeed, yet on this path we are guaranteed life, joy and riches that the world cannot understand. In Christ we possess everything that is worth anything, as our reading from 2 Corinthians reminds us.

But lets finally remember that being Christians means that our encounter with God is all brought into colour and sharp focus because of the life death and resurrection of Jesus. We know who God is because we know Jesus. And

so what kind of encounter might we expect this lent? How will it feel to encounter God?

Well, it might well feel unpredictable. In our gospel reading we see that Jesus is being set up. But people who try to control Jesus are doomed to fail. Jesus turns the tables on the powerful and they are reminded of their responsibility and their fallibility. The woman is reminded that she is not defined by being a mess-up but Jesus give her the dignity of his attention and the encounter leads to freedom. “Go and sin no more.” You are more than the reputation you came here with. You are free from condemnation. You are made new. Go, enjoy your new life.

Encountering Jesus will set us free.

So let me conclude. Lent is a gift to enable us to encounter God. How can we make the most of this gift?

By connecting our worship to the rest of our lives and loving God first and our neighbours, that is everyone else, second.

Examine ourselves – is there anything that is holding us back from putting God on the throne of our lives? From really trusting God with all that there is to care about? Do we believe that God loves us?

Encounter God by loving our neighbours: Foodbank, Night shelter, pay attention to people, be generous, Be kinder than is necessary. Are we paying our bills on time and our staff, cleaners, babysitters fairly?

Meet with others on the journey. Come to the Lent course here on Thursdays to discover more about Jesus who so wants to set us free.

Join us on Friday mornings through Lent at 6.30 to pray and listen to God in the parish. We will encounter Him on the common and in the streets, outside the schools and the shops.

But please remember none of this will make God love us more – God’s love for us is already total. But some of this may help us to put Jesus on the throne of our lives and to love our neighbours as ourselves. And if that happens, then we will have really encountered God this lent.

Amen