

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022

We stand now at the beginning of Lent, a traditional time of fasting, self-examination, penitence, prayer, study and almsgiving. So how shall we keep Lent this year? When I was a kid, sometimes my Catholic friends would be asking each other, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Usually it was sweets or some kind of food. In College, too, people would ask, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Alcohol was big on the list then. Or sometimes meat. But I’m not sure how many of us had any idea of what it was all about, really.

Lent is really a time of getting back on track. It is supposed to be a season of growth. In fact, the origins of the word “Lent” are about the lengthening of days in springtime. A time to reset ourselves and our relationships. Particularly with God. A time of renewal, of refreshment and new life.

So the first thing we do in Lent is take a long, hard look at ourselves and figure out where we’ve gotten off kilter. How is our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health doing? Where do we need a bit of rejigging? Where do we need to get back on track? Where do we need some renewal and refreshment? Some healing, perhaps? Or forgiveness? Where have we become disordered and need to be reordered?

So this year, we are at the end of 2 hard years of deprivation. Whether we wanted to or not, we have given up seeing our family and friends, given up parties, given up going out places, given up travel, given up hugging people, in some cases given up going to church. And, as we got more and more tired, we have also found it harder to pray, harder to even care sometimes. We have already given up so much, things that are of central importance to us, too. It has been a very long, hard couple of years.

So maybe we may not be in the mood for giving up more stuff this Lent. So what should we be doing this Lent? I’m going to say that harsh fasting probably isn’t the answer. I’m going to suggest we’ve had enough harshness right now and we need to be gentle and loving with ourselves. We need to take stock and figure out what we need to be healthy in all these areas and make sure we give it to ourselves.

Of course, if we spent a lot of the last two years sitting at home baking and eating our baking, it might be a good idea to give up some of those sweets, to help renew our physical health and well-being. I’m planning to give up chocolate and snacks between meals for those very reasons. I know they’ve gotten to be unhealthy habits and I’m hoping Lent will help me break them and go back to a healthier lifestyle. So perhaps a little fasting, if it will help you get healthy, physically or otherwise.

I suspect most of us need some help with our emotional health. Most of us have been too much alone these last two years. Who do you miss most? I wonder if we could make a point of connecting with them? Lent is a good time to take on new, good habits. Maybe get in touch with someone you love and haven’t seen and go for a walk together or do something you both feel is safe. Renew your social life. Come back to church, maybe.

Lent is a time for penitence. For repenting of the stuff we're doing wrong or not doing right. This is not to humiliate us or make us feel crummy about ourselves. This is so we can offer it to God and be healed of it. So we can stop hurting ourselves or others by the things we do or fail to do. This is so God can forgive us and help us get back on track, get back to healthier ways of doing things. So we can let it go and be free of it.

Lent is a time for extra prayer. What kind of prayer would help you connect more closely with God? Perhaps you haven't let that go, and your prayer life is very healthy. Excellent! Keep up the good work. But perhaps your prayer life feels too much like work right now, too dull and boring. Perhaps you skip it sometimes. If so, you're in good company. But that's not to say it's a good thing. How can you renew your prayer life? Perhaps try a different kind of prayer. I can give you some suggestions if you like. And there are lots and lots online. The Diocesan website has lots of suggestions for how to renew our prayer lives. So does our church library.

Lent is a time for study. That includes reading and meditating on the Scriptures, and I encourage you to do that. But our Lenten study this year is also a helpful thing. It helps us to look at our relationship with time. Do we have too much time on our hands, so time hangs heavily on us? Or are we always rushing and never having enough time? How can we restore our relationship with time and, in doing that, restore the healthy balance of our lives? I encourage you to do the study. I am really looking forward to it. I think it will be helpful to me because I always seem to be running out of time these days.

Lent is a time of almsgiving. We are raising money for the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund. Their theme this year is Climate Action. You can see the display here, and there will be inserts in your bulletins telling more about the Primate's Fund work. Or give alms somewhere else. Giving alms, or to charities, helps us remember that everything we have is a gift of God, and when we share those gifts, hold them lightly, they lose their grip on us. It brings us a peace and satisfaction we will never get from hoarding them. It helps to set us free.

These are all good things to do, but the most important thing is to take a look at your life, at the state of your health, and that includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, and see what needs a bit of attention from you. In what ways can you give yourself some tender loving care to get yourself back on track? How can you find renewal and refreshment and new life this Lent?

The psalmist today reminds us of the loving compassion of God, of God's kindness to us. It says that as a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for us. God does not expect too much from us, because God remembers that we are frail creatures, that we are but dust. God doesn't deal with us according to our sins, says the psalmist, but according to God's mercy. Perhaps a good place to start in your self-examination is to ask yourself the question, "What kind of loving kindness would God like to lavish on me? Is there some area where God would like to bring healing? Or reassurance? What would my loving God hope for for me, right now?"

You know, once I was doing some volunteer work at a big gathering where people were taking meditation courses and such and the spiritual head of the movement was there, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. I was in charge of the dining hall and there were about 1500 or 2000 people there. Thankfully I didn't have to organise the cooking, just making sure people could get the food. It was a big job and by the 6th day I was really tired.

That day, during lunch, Sri Sri came to the meal tent and came right up to me and said I was tired. He told someone to get me some lunch and told me to sit down and eat and rest for a while and take the afternoon off. And someone else took over. And I started crying a little. It was so good to know that he cared and noticed and was looking after me. I went for a walk, did my laundry, had a swim, spent some time meditating myself. And felt ready to go back to work at dinner time.

God is like that, you know. God does not demand of us more and more, more than we can give, like some kind of tyrant slavedriver. God is full of compassion and mercy. I think right now, God would like us all to sit down and rest. Take a breather. Look after ourselves. Get reconnected to God and to each other. Get reconnected to ourselves, and to treat ourselves kindly and look after our needs, whatever they may be.

I pray that we may all keep a holy Lent and be renewed and refreshed in all aspects of our lives. May it truly be a springtime for us, as the name suggests, a time of growth, health and new life. Amen.