

PREPARING FOR LENT

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I am a relative newcomer to the observance of Lent. This is only my third year of committing to this solemn period in the life of the church where we prepare our hearts and identify with Jesus in a deeper way the journey he took to his death on the cross and on to his resurrection. As a child and especially as a young teen I heard whispers, comments from those in my class but they didn't make much sense to me. 'We can't eat any chocolate until Easter, but we've got them all stashed away ready.' Mum and dad aren't drinking alcohol till Easter, but they've got plenty in the cupboard.' A child's view and a very limited perspective on Lent.

Today is Ash Wednesday. Ashes are spoken of in Scripture and remind us of our mortality. We remember that we are dust and that to dust we shall return. They are also used in Scripture as a symbol of mourning. So what do these next 40 days mean for us?

A Time to Remember

We remember the flood and God's promises to Noah and his family as they waited to leave the ark.

We remember God's provision and protection of the people of Israel as they wandered 40 years in the wilderness.

We especially remember Jesus and his 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness after his baptism, his journey to the cross and his sacrifice.

We remember our own frailty, our own mortality, the times we have let God down in our own attitudes and actions.

BUT above all that we remember God's goodness, his abundant love and faithfulness towards us. His continual grace even when we muck up. As Joel 2 puts it - to think again about God's mercy and compassion, his patience and his unfailing love.

A Time to Repent

Joel 2 calls us to rend our hearts and not our garments. He calls us to repent with fasting, weeping and mourning. Why? Because as the people of God, though our intentions may well be to follow God and obey him in all things and at all times, far too often we turn again to our own desires, our own ways. In one sense we come individually before God but Joel made this about the whole community of God. All the people were to be gathered from the elderly to the babies, from those even on honeymoon, every person including the priests. No one was exempt. It was a call to more than lip service. It was a call to fast and to seek God together in earnest prayer. The whole point was to give God's people opportunity to turn again

wholeheartedly towards God. In 2 Corinthians 6:1 Paul is passionate when he says 'As God's partners we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness – our salvation – and then ignore it. Whether intentionally or unintentionally we have often drifted from our devotion to God. We are called to again deepen our life with God in this season of Lent; to seek God's forgiveness where we have failed to follow Him in love and in living as he called us to – according to his principles and in his strength.

A Time to Reflect

Our Gospel reading in Matthew gives us much to reflect on. It talks about our alms giving, our prayer life and our fasting. All these are often practiced by us during Lent. Matthew gives good instructions. Our motives are not to do any of these to be noticed by others. It's about our heart preparation before God. Each of these areas are to bring us into closer friendship with our God. Each of these practices are at a cost to us, to our self life which helps us understand a little more, the incredible cost Jesus paid in his journey to the cross and to his resurrection. For US – what LOVE and what SACRIFICE. It is interesting to me that none of these practices say IF you do them but WHEN you do them.

So What Does This Mean for Us This Year?

Perhaps we will give up meat or chocolate or alcohol for the season. But let's extend that. The cost of those things we've chosen to 'give up' could perhaps become our offering to an organization that serves those who don't have enough food. Locally we have Just Zilch as a good example. You will know others. Alms giving isn't our general church giving. Its more for the poor.

Perhaps we will 'give up' a favourite TV programme or some time on social media. Again, we can extend that by taking those time slots and deliberately spend them in prayer.

Lastly, I wonder if it is an opportunity for us all to fast from areas that detract from our walk with God. Perhaps to fast from gossip and instead pray for those we might gossip about. Perhaps to fast from criticizing those we don't get on with so well or who are different to us and instead to pray for our own forgiveness and for God to bless those folk we find hard to like for whatever reason.

Let's identify more with Jesus as we follow his journey to the cross, including his pain and suffering, in our Bible Readings. Let's ask for his searching of our hearts with a willingness on our part to repent as he shows us areas in our hearts that he wants to touch and transform.

This season of Lent let's ask God to help us have a deep heart transformation with him as we remember, repent, and reflect.