

*Let us pray:*

*Lord we ask that through these words and all of our thoughts we will*

*Open our minds to love you better and our hearts to love you more*

*Amen*

A few birthdays ago, when my hair was a different colour to what you see today and I was a lot slimmer, I was given some money to treat myself. After some thought I decided to buy myself a particular Bible translation that, I had been told about and so off I trotted to the Bible Bookshop to see if it was there for me to look at. Joy of joys, there it was sitting on the shelf and there I was happily looking at it until..... the lovely shop assistant came over to me. A very cheerful young girl, anxious to engage in conversation and probably a sale and all was well until she said "how lovely to see an older person like yourself looking at that Bible". After a suitable pause I put the Bible back on the shelf and left the shop.

I had felt "put out" for want of a better phrase by being referred to as an "older person" and the inference that my age precluded me from being interested in something new. Now the good news is, that I gave myself a good talking to as I did the rest of my shopping and went back and bought the Bible, and from the same lovely **young** girl!

Reference to age I think probably makes us aware of our own fragility, particularly as we get older. This last year in particular has been one that has highlighted for us all how fragile life can be, and still is. For many life will not be the same, there will be gaps in families where a loved person used to sit, there will be in mine. There is a sense where life will not be the same for any of us.

Ash Wednesday starts a season where we are once more preparing ourselves for Jesus, this time preparing for the risen Christ who reigns victorious each day of our lives. Thanks be to God, the lamb is on the throne and we can sing alleluia.

Of course, Ash Wednesday takes a very different shape this year. But just cast your minds back to when you first became aware of it as a Christian tradition. I came to it quite late in my Christian life but I can still remember the first time, the feeling of the cross-marked on my forehead and the desire of wanting to rub it off as soon as I could.

However, there was also the sense of this being serious stuff, not uncertainty that nothing matters but the exact opposite ...everything matters. Nothing is inconsequential – every word, every choice, every action – makes a difference. Every person in our life, every relationship, every moment - matters. We matter and we are in this together, wherever we are today, whatever our age, marked with ashes or not tomorrow or any other day, we are in this season together.

We are all used to the words - hands, face, space by now, and Phil's hands, face, space, dance at Christmas still brings a smile to my face! Our readings for Ash Wednesday invite us to a different dance – Stop! Listen! Think!

At this point in time, we will never be the same person again. Last year we were different, next year we will be another different, a new stage of life, another year older and I for one will be a first time Grandma. This is the time to stop. Whatever you are doing stop.

***Blow the trumpet*** – the time is now,

***Gather the people, bring together the elders, gather the children,***

***Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber*** - it is time for everyone to ***return to me with all your heart***

2021 has been the year when God had stopped us all in our tracks. At this moment in time, we cannot physically apply ashes, at this time we cannot be together in one place but this is still the time when we can Stop and Listen and ask God to show us by his grace what he wants from us in this season of Lent.

Usually by the time the last amen is out of our lips on Ash Wednesday someone is bound to ask “what are you giving up for Lent?”. It’s the question I dread being asked! It implies I’ve got to achieve something which then leads to a massive guilt trip when I’ve failed to live up to the promise I’ve made. Do you know that feeling?

What God wants from us in this season will be very different for each one of us, it may not be about “giving up” we may need to think of “taking up” something or doing something differently. This is the time to listen and think.

Jesus teaching in the gospel reading gives us some direction as we listen and discern Gods voice for ourselves.

He gives quite a stark warning in this teaching... it is a beware of **how not**: how not to “be religious”, how not to pray, how not to look for reward. True reward is for the disciple who has forged a relationship with God that is based on honesty and love. The theatrical style of the hypocrite is placed in direct contrast to the life of disciple of Christ, where secrecy and just being normal is the order of the day.

***and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.***

This is the time to listen to what our hearts are saying ... what are the things we need to leave behind this Lent. Is it the chain of your phone or your Facebook account? Is it the sugar hit or the nice cappuccino? Or is it the challenge of praying or reading scripture more? Only you will know and when you do then is the time to think, where your treasure is because

***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

This may be the time when we are called to re-treasure the things that we have taken for granted in the past. People, relationships, justice and compassion. To re-treasure love, forgiveness, hope, beauty. They are the treasures of heaven that

***moths and vermin do not destroy, or thieves break in and steal.***

they are the values that bring integrity and wholeness to our lives which bring us in step with kingdom values.

This is the time to think, time to turn the “beware of” into resources to help us. Jesus refers to the three important spiritual resources in Jewish tradition – giving to the needy, prayer and fasting. Our thinking may point you to anyone of these. You may need to think about giving in a different way, it may involve being brave enough to be able to say “no” to somethings. It may be that you are being called to pray in a different way or to make more time for prayer. Or to fast from something that stops you making time to do the very things that make your relationship with God deeper and stronger and allow you to grow.

This is a time to grow. Wherever our thinking leads us, let’s make our response thoughtful response and one that allows us to grow and mature in spirit.

This is the day when we can stop, listen and think.

This is the season when we can reflect and grow

It is the season that is full of grace.

Stop! Listen! Think!

What is God saying to you?

God is at work with us at every step and

We are in it together. Amen