

Homily for Ash Wednesday 2015

It is still horribly cold...but the days are beginning to lengthen at last! And that's where we get the word 'Lent' from. The old English word 'lenten' means the time of lengthening and growing days. For centuries, that time of growth has been a pointer to the idea of spiritual growth and renewal.

Traditionally, spiritual growth and renewal has always been assisted by penitence, fasting, giving to the poor, and prayer. None of these ideas are only about self-denial. Like anointing with oil, fasting was believed to be a purifying and strengthening challenge...a preparation for some challenge yet to come. And the idea of giving things up for Lent was always balanced by the requirement to give something out to the poor: for we surely cannot claim to love the God whom we have not seen if we do not love the poor at our door that we do see.

That is why each year our Bishop invites us to participate in his Lent Appeal. This is an extra call on our purses - at a time when we are encouraged to think most deeply about what it means to be a follower of a Lord who gave up everything for us. This year, Bishop Christopher is inviting us to contribute to two causes: one at home, and one abroad. At home, we will be called on to support work among those suffering from mental health issues; abroad, we will be supporting the work of the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation, which provides surgery and rehabilitation for victims of violence. Pat, our curate, recently spent time in the Holy Land with other curates, where she visited BASR. We'll be hearing more about her experiences later in Lent.

This is a time for tidying up and preparing for Spring and Easter. Having just taken over the enormous grounds of Meadowlands, I'm especially conscious of the need to clear away dead leaves, trim the bushes, plant new seeds. I've especially had fun mowing down the two-foot high grass that was left by the last tenants!

This is a time for tidying our spiritual lives as well. In a moment, I will invite you all to receive the sign of the cross, drawn in ashes and olive

oil on your foreheads. This is a sign of repentance...a sign that we recognise ourselves to be human beings who fail - and who seek the forgiveness of our heavenly father.

This then is the heart of Lent...growth and spiritual renewal stem from an appreciation of who we are...failing human beings. We are like a plant that needs the sun. We cannot grow without the love, wisdom and power of our heavenly father. That's why, alongside the Bishop's Lent Appeal, we also invite you to participate in a Lent Course. The Christians of Havant are combining their resources to provide a course on almost every day of the week during Lent. Let me encourage you to sign up for one of those course...take the chance to deepen your understanding of the wisdom and power of God to transform and change you.

As we receive the Ashes, today, we will be reminded that we are 'but dust...from dust you came and to dust you shall return;'. To the modern ear this sounds a rather morbid thought...but actually it's intended to remind us, very simply of what we are...

We are made of dust. Stardust, in fact...our atoms once burned in the heart of the Universe before they became grouped together with the ball of rock we call Planet Earth. From the nutrients, atoms and molecules of that planet, each of us came forth. Our mothers ate what the planet provided, and we came forth. We are the product of a physical and biological process. But what else are we?

Christians proclaim that yes, we are made of Stardust...but we are also given life by the Spirit and Power of the living God. It is his power that sustains us, his wisdom that guides us, and his forgiveness which frees us to become all that we can become as Children of God. From dust we came, and to dust we shall return...but thanks be to God: our Spirits will sing, and our souls will be set free.

So let me invite you to receive the Ash cross this year, as a sign of your commitment to carry on growing in God...to reach beyond the dust from which you were made, to become the child of God you were

destined to be.

Amen

Canon Tom Kennar
18th February 2015