

I've never really liked the idea of giving something up for Lent, always sounds a bit negative. My prejudice was confirmed by a Bishop, my Bishop, who once gave up email for Lent. Which I'm sure was fine for him but was a pain for everybody else in the diocese. Do we really want to get to Easter day and celebrate the fact that we denied ourselves chocolate for Lent? Will that really have moved our lives forward? Will there be a lasting benefit? Lent isn't primarily about denial. I've always been in favor of taking something on for Lent, for embracing something new, some spiritual practice that might have a long-lasting benefit. Last year, Rebecca encouraged many of us to read the Bible and it's a great joy now getting to this Lent having read through the whole Bible, which I've never done before.

Look how our Lenten collect begins. It starts with a reminder that God hates nothing that He has made and moves on to two positive requests. First for forgiveness, second, for new hearts. Starting points are always important and our starting point for our Lenten observers is particularly important. Are we starting with the goal of denying ourselves something for 40 days? Or are we starting with a positive goal of embracing something and having our hearts renewed? Let's be asking ourselves, "What is the purpose of our Lenten observance?"

It seems clear from the readings that we've heard that Lent is more about having our hearts renewed than anything else. The Prophet Joel says, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, lend your hearts and not your clothing." And our gospel reading seems to have Jesus reinforcing that point, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The points of what Jesus is saying in the gospel is that our piety, our spiritual disciplines and practice are not primarily external where they might be seen by others, but they're internal, they're affairs of the heart.

It's not about doing things so that others can see them, it's about storing up, building up treasure in our hearts. It's about getting right with God and reassessing our priorities. The Archbishop William Temple said that our lives are like a shop window into which some mischievous person has got in overnight and shifted all the price labels so that the cheap

things have high price labels, and the really precious things are priced low, and we let ourselves be taken in, and repentance, which is what we're called to in Lent, Means getting those price labels back in the right place.

What will help us repent to get those labels in the appropriate places? One thing we might do is to come on Wednesday nights for the Lenten Soup Suppers that Mother Rebecca has organized where we'll be studying this Lent the Enneagram, which many people over the years have found to be a helpful tool for spiritual growth. That's something practical we could take on, or we could promise ourselves to attend the Lenten Forums, 8:45 on a Sunday morning, we could do that for Lent and hear the wonderful teacher David Mosley talking about Paul's letters, something that might nourish our hearts, that might stir up spiritual growth and treasure in our hearts.

It's also important to remember on Ash Wednesday, that the renewal we are seeking, the disciplines we are looking to instill are not things we undertake in our own strength. When we receive, as we'll be receiving later the ashes on our forehead, that remind us of our frailty and our weakness, they are not meant to be in the form of a shapeless smudge. Although I apologize in advance for the fact that sometimes they do appear as a shapeless smudge, they're not meant to.

What Rebecca and I will be doing is tracing the sign of the cross on your forehead. The ashes don't come as a smudge, they come in the shape of a cross. It's the cross on which Jesus died, the same cross which was traced on your forehead at baptism. The cross which is the power of God for our salvation. It's the spirit, the power of God, the power made manifest on the cross which renews and restores our soul. We don't undertake Lent in our own strength, we don't summon up all that we can do to deny ourselves. Rather, the point of Lent is opening ourselves up to God's Spirit that He might be at work in us to transform us.

The 19th century publishers Harper's & Row had a horse called Dobbin who they used to power the printing press. So Dobbin was tied to a pole and then

walked round and round the pole, presumably to press down the leaves of the book. He did this for years and eventually people felt sorry for Dobbin and thought that he deserved his freedom. So he was uncoupled from the machine and taken out to the countryside and left in the field, where poor Dobbin, his health deteriorated, he got weak and frail. He didn't eat or move. Then somebody had the bright idea that a pole should be put in the field to which Dobbin should be tied. Which they did, and Dobbin suddenly perked up, because he knew what to do, he spent his days walking round the pole in the middle of the field, because Dobbin was released too late. He was too old, too set in his ways to change his ways. What he lacked was that outside force, power, person, to come and teach him new ways.

That's what we do in Lent, we call on the Holy Spirit to teach us new ways of living, so we don't resort to the old ways and practices that have held us back over the years. Sometimes, our Lenten observance could become a bit Dobbinesque, just going round and round the same shortcomings, continuing to flirt with the same old failings that have troubled us for years. But we have been set free from our bondage to sin. Christ has freed us from the tyranny of sin, that is the power of the cross. We live on the right side of Easter, so let us not return to our former bondage. Let's remember this Lent, that we are not only freed from sin, we are freed to something. We have been let go as it were, like Dobbin in the field, not to just practice the same ways, but to live in a new way with different motivation. Our hearts are renewed so that we can have a heart for others, a heart to serve.

Salvation is not simply about an individual sanctification. It's a call to participate and establish the kingdom of God, God's rule of justice and righteousness in our midst. We are freed from our former lives, so that we can work for the coming of God's kingdom. Let me finish with some great words from the Prophet Isaiah, that are often heard on Ash Wednesday, "Is this the fast that I should choose, says the Lord, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover them

and not to hide yourself from your own kin. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly. Your vindicator shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard, then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry for help, and He will say, Here I am."

Amen.