

Ash Wednesday

Our religion is whatever we use to unite the experience of being alive. I would always ask my religion to turn me resolutely to the truth, painful as it sometimes is, and to a palpable light, the most intense that I can find. This already means that some of our feasts are going to be gloriously joyous, and some will surely be sombre. Ash Wednesday has about it the bitter tang of truths we'd rather ignore; but it also has the beauty that belongs only to truthfulness, and a kind of seriousness which makes it a salutary and trustworthy day. Ash Wednesday makes us confront the *ultimate* truth. Here all of us who are human can meet God.

I want to speak to you today from the heart, when I ask you to receive a call in your own heart. I want you to trust me when I tell you that the three great voyages which Jesus proposes to you in the Gospel are three acts of *love*. They belong together, and they control one another, and you can't properly do any one, or any two, without doing all three. Lent is a very real experience, but it has its own discipline, which is the fruit of centuries of learning: Jesus knew the triple weaponry of Lent, and how they make the process of salvation an integral and comprehensive fact in us.

Fasting is an act of love as physical as any bodily act can be. It is different from many so-called acts of love in that it is totally selfless. It simply makes space. It's fine to give up food or drink or sweets, but it doesn't have to stop there: we can give up sleep, or comfort, or even work, if work has become a selfish prison. The body can be an instrument of generosity in many ways: but in fasting the giving is pure: space comes in the flesh when we deny it any reward, and make it empty of pay-offs or compulsions, of which it is naturally very full.

Because fasting does nobody good - it isn't slimming, it isn't saving money even for good causes: it's a making of emptiness for the love of God alone - it has to be a secret thing. By fasting you assault the bonds of selfishness that live in your body, and which can accompany your whole life with their domination. Many around us have simply enshrined selfishness as the proper engine of all their thoughts, words, and deeds. This is not to happen among you.

Prayer is an act of love in the spiritual realm. By reaching out in your spirit to find God, to rest in him and to listen for his word, you build the relationship which is the most powerful field any human life can enter. In the time you give to prayer, God is God, and you belong to God. God will love you more deeply and eternally than any human being. To turn from all else, and to pray, is to seek for that love *alone*.

If you do that, the space you have made by your fasting is filled with the power that flows from the love of God, embracing every atom and fibre that he has made in your body, every capacity and space in your spirit. This divine indwelling will align your whole life in new ways, empowering and guiding, enabling and freeing: it is like the unblocking of arteries, the dissolving of paralysis. We are made for the encounter with God. We know no peace until we rest in him.

The work of these two experiences of love cannot be confined in an isolated life. They overflow into **relationship**, and so the third blade of the Lenten trident is forged: the giving of gifts. We are all surrounded by aching poverty. Lent puts gifts into our hands which we are called to share; our time, less given to wasteful and senseless things, is freed up for works of kindness; our less greedy lifestyle will make us able to give practical help to the poor.

Sharing with the Church brings us a new experience as members of the body of Christ; Lent is full of opportunities to come together, and to express our being the Church in liturgy and witness. To share our faith becomes possible and beautiful only when we ourselves are being properly fed at its table, and blessed by its tremendous access to the house, the heart, of God.

These three, interdependent, integrated calls to love offer us *life*: ultimate, eternal life, whose heartbeat is faith in God, hope in God, and the love of God which we share with each other. Don't let the strange deed of putting ashes on your head make it a narrowing, moribund thing. There is a half-life that we have been half living and half enduring. This poor life must be enriched, awakened, and honoured by its true destiny, the freedom and glory of the children of God.

This holy season offers us nothing less than that.