

Reflection for Ash Wednesday (and week commencing 15th February, 2021)

Matthew 18: 1-9

Who is the Greatest?

To end the wrangling and competitive rivalry, Jesus puts a little child before the disciples. A child in the world of Jesus has no status; was perhaps seen but not heard; had no importance and no say in the society which he or she was born into. It is the end of the discussion. Unless you become like this child – humble, without power – you will not achieve greatness in the Kingdom of God. For to serve in the Kingdom of God is just that – servant ministry – not the call to acquire greatness and adulation as the disciples were blatantly hoping to do.

Little has changed since the First Century AD. There are uncontrollable lusts for power both within and beyond the church, and none of these lusts have anything to do with the Kingdom Jesus envisioned. We might have lusts for other things and Jesus warns us that it is better to remove body parts than to commit the sins that the lusts give rise to. Please note, I'm not suggesting that anyone gouges out their eyes or lops off a foot because A&E is stretched enough as it is. The point is, know what the weakness is and steer clear.

We are about to enter into Lent – a time for self-examination. It all sounds rather pious and abstract. Do we need a course or a book for this? Not really.

When Jesus is urged into the wilderness by the thrust of the Holy Spirit it is not with the Archbishop's Lent Book that he goes to face the deepest crevices of his being. The 40 days and 40 nights are a boot camp preparation for his future ministry. Jesus goes head-to-head with Satan's persistent challenging of his authority, his mission, and, particularly, his identity. The voice inside is malign and urgent, and yet Jesus overcomes the taunts of the evil one whereas we often give in to whatever masters our human nature (*which Jesus understood and is precisely why we need Jesus*).

Lent is a time when we are brought face to face with ourselves. This is, for those who practice it, a painful experience. The Spirit urged Jesus into the wilderness. This is not a choice for Jesus and it is not a choice for us. Where there is work to do there is also preparation. And discipline. And those whom God loves he disciplines or works on, or prunes, or whatever analogy you want to use. Lent is when this happens.

Before we can serve God there has to be a creaturely recognition of all that God is and has done for us in Christ. There has to be a humbling. We are saved by grace through faith, not by our own efforts or will. Lent is a time to know this: not only with our heads but also with our hearts. It is a time to throw ourselves on God's mercy and forgiveness, trusting in his goodness and future. If you want to go on a Lenten journey, pray, read the bible each day – go through the psalms, one of the Gospels, or just pick a book of the bible that interests you. Make time to enter the wilderness; listen to

God and let him do the searching. You might like to pray this prayer before you begin:

Heavenly Father,

We come before you in penitence and faith.

We acknowledge the times when we have sought the admiration and praise of people rather than the reward of heaven.

We acknowledge the times we have put our own interests first.

We acknowledge the times when we have been so absorbed by the world that we have failed to hear your voice.

We acknowledge when we have failed to humble ourselves in your presence and before others.

We acknowledge the times we have trusted in our own ability, forgetting that everything we have comes from you.

Lord, we ask you to forgive us and breathe your Spirit into our lives afresh.

Lead us into the wilderness, show us who we really are, purify us, prune us and prepare us for all that lies ahead in the service of your Kingdom.

Protect us from the evil one.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.