

## Sermon: 2021/02/17 ("Ash Wednesday," Year B) - Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Psalm 103:1-9; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21\_BTR

### Lent: An Invitation to Experiment with Holiness

What is the point of Lent?

Is it just some medieval relic?

A "throwback" to "Dark Age" religion.

A thoughtless leftover from Catholicism, crying out to be "Reformed" away.

Or does it have some real, *abiding* purpose?

And is that purpose just to forego some chocolate?

To encourage us to drink one glass of wine with dinner rather than two?

To bet a little less on the horses?

One cigar with my evening sherry, not two?

Or does our modern approach make a mockery of its meaning?

It has something to do with self-denial, right?

But what is curious is that the things we typically choose to "deny" ourselves in Lent are things that Jesus didn't even bother with in the *first* place.

So, when He spoke of self-denial He had in mind luxuries that we probably wouldn't even recognize as such.

He probably meant luxuries that we think of as *necessities*!

The problem, I think, for the Church today, is that the "goal-posts" have moved. They're just not where they were *then*.

(Each generation pushes them further and further "down the field.")

(Taking more and more new "creature comforts" for granted.)

So, we hear "pick up your Cross" [Lk. 9:23] or "put to death the flesh" [Gal. 5:24/Rom. 8:13b], and we interpret that as meaning one thing, and Christ and the

Apostles meant something else:

for they could only *imagine* the riches we would come to enjoy;

the many and multiple, *easy* pleasures we have to hand.

We're *sooo*(!) prosperous in 21st century America - even the poor - compared to 1st century Galilee, *and accustomed* to that extraordinary prosperity (relative to earlier historical periods), that we have been *dis*-abled to see what it *really* might mean to be the kind of people called to build the Kingdom.

A *humble* people; a *rustic* people;

a *simple* people: [see Mt. 5:5/Lk. 6:20. Also Ps. 37:11].

consider the lilies, the Savior said: [Mt. 6:28].

Give up *everything* and follow me, He said: [Mt. 19:21].

He saw this outlining one kind of lifestyle, and we picture another.

Thus, *He* had no where to lay His head [Mt. 8:20]; we buy ourselves second homes.

*He* would walk quite literally *hundreds* of miles to attend Temple - He had a *zeal* for His father's house; but some of us can barely muster enough enthusiasm to switch on YouTube to watch worship online from the comfort of a couch.

(Something else that Jesus didn't possess.)

As I said: the "goal-posts" just aren't where they used to be.

We have grown lazy - it can't be denied;

complacent and 'lukewarm' [see Rev. 3:16].

And is this what Lent is about?

Exposing this truth?

Is the purpose of Lent to *dis*-comfort us?

To wake us up to the reality that the "goal-posts" have been pushed *too* far and must be drawn back?

Is Lent, then, about feeling bad?

About listening to a hypocritical preacher criticise you for taking pleasure in reaping the benefits of your hard-work and long hours at the office?

Is the purpose of Lent to encourage greater self-loathing?

Yes and no.

"Yes," we should welcome the reminder that most of us are failing to live as *Christians*.

But not because there's anything inherently meritorious about feeling guilty.

No, the *real* purpose of Lent is that it presents us with an opportunity -

It's a yearly invitation to a *daring* experiment

- an "experiment" that most of us never really, *fully* attempt -

that by maybe, *just maybe*, by crucifying materialism, consumerism, individualism and self-centrism, we might discover unexpected *riches* that bring *greater* joy....

Heavenly, imperishable, joyous "riches."

We must have faith to believe that it might be so.