

Ash Wednesday

17th Feb 2021

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. Many people think of Lent as a time for giving up something like chocolate or alcohol.

For Christians it is a time of reflection, a time to assess our lives. We are urged to take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness. In time gone by people would wear sackcloth and cover themselves with ash to show that they were sorry. It was a way of publicly demonstrating regret and resolving to do better.

The gospel reading for today is from John chapter 8.

We heard the story of the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders of the day wanted to stone her – indeed there are countries where this is still the punishment for adultery. Jesus's response was *'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'*

How does this story apply to us today? Do we put on our feminist hats and ask where is the man involved in this act? Why is the woman taking all the blame?

Or do we think 'I've not done anything that bad' so this does not apply to me? Do we understand that sin is anything that stops us being the person God made us to be?

Sin is not just the big things like adultery, murder, stealing. Sin is telling tales, wishing ill on another person, being uncooperative, losing one's temper, thoughtlessness, ignoring someone, avoiding someone. All these things stop us being the person we are made to be and all are like dirt which needs removing. Regret is not enough – we need to repent to wash away the dirt and do better. It's not easy – it's often so hard that we try everything else before admitting that repentance is the only way.

So Ash Wednesday applies to all of us. Each of us can put ourself in the woman's place. It may be that somebody has accused you of something but more likely there are things, behaviours, reactions, thoughts, of which you are your own accuser.

It never ceases to amaze me that every time I reflect on this passage Jesus does not condemn me but overwhelms me with love.

Receiving forgiveness means receiving his love – of course, easy, you say but take a moment to reflect: are there times when I am able to accept that Jesus has forgiven me but I have not forgiven myself?

That failure to forgive myself acts as a blockage, preventing me from receiving the full measure of his love.

Or are there times when I accept that I'm forgiven and that's it – off I go, I don't take the time to receive His love. I need his love to ensure that I don't fall into the same trap again. Not only is repentance so hard we try to avoid it but receiving God's love is not easy either – I have to give time to receive his love, be in his presence. The poet and cleric George Herbert describes it as sitting and eating Love's meat –

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne,

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Please make sure this Lent that you not only repent but also take time to sit and eat.