

Jeremiah 17.5-10  
Joel 2.1-2, 12-17  
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is a solemn day. It marks the beginning of a long period, of self reflection, of giving things up, or taking up a new spiritual discipline or practice, and a time when we are journeying with Jesus through the wilderness. It's a time to think about how we are with God.

How do we relate to God? What do we have in our lives that causes us to think about God, or to pray, or enables us to be more aware of our own spirituality?

Traditionally, Lent is a time for repentance. And as I'm sure most of you know, to repent, means to turn - so this is an opportunity for us to step back, and see where and how we might be able to turn more towards God. Or another way to think about it might be - what draws your heart? What things, or people, times or places, make your heart feel full, and whole? And is God included in that?

You may remember that a couple of weeks ago we had a reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. And

in this reading he talks about a person who trusts in God - Jeremiah says:

**Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.**

And we can think about our hearts in this way. Imagine that your heart is like a tree planted by a stream, and all the things that bring you joy and wholeness are the water of the stream, giving life, and helping you grow.

So even though Lent usually feels like a more serious time, when we are asked to think about how we have fallen short, and how far we sometimes are from what God wants for us, it is also a time for growing. Lent can be a wonderful time for growth.

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Another way to think about it is in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, which was all about what we show on the outside, compared to what we do in private. And we have inner and outer lives as individuals too. We all have our lives that we live on the outside, where

we go to places, and do things, and meet people. It's the life that we spend most of our time thinking about.

But we all have an inner life as well. There are our hopes and dreams and sorrows, our anxieties, our longings, our joys. Our inner life is our heart, or our soul. And in the gospel reading Jesus tells us quite clearly, that our heart belongs with what we hold dear. He says, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' The things you value the most, will shape your heart and soul.

So in your inner life, what is the stream that feeds your heart? What is your treasure; and is it of God?

I should perhaps admit, that I am not very good at giving things up for Lent. In fact, I don't think I've ever managed to do it. But something that I do instead is to take something up. So my Lenten discipline is to go to bed that little bit sooner, and to spend a few minutes reading, before I go to sleep. And I try to choose a book that makes me think about God, and about my heart. So in this way, I try to use Lent as a way to help me turn my heart more towards God.

Because the fact is, it is so so easy to be distracted by everything else in life, to be caught up in our outer lives, that we don't give enough time and space to our inner lives. We often don't pay enough attention to what is watering our hearts, to what our treasure is. So Lent is the chance to pause, and repent, and turn, like sunflowers to the sun, towards God.

I don't know whether you noticed, but in the reading from the Prophet Joel there was the sentence: 'Return to me with all your heart'. In other words, water your heart with God. Immerse yourself in God, don't be afraid to dive in headlong and seek God with every fibre of your soul, because God is always longing for us to repent, to turn.

So today as we mark the beginning of Lent; as we receive the cross of ash to remind us of the greatness of God's love, and of the smallness of our selves without God, let us examine our inner lives.

Let us take this time to consider what our treasure is, what waters us and helps us grow, and let us enter into the wilderness of Lent willingly and wonderingly, as we again re-turn our hearts and souls towards our creator.

Amen.

*Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*