

Ash Wednesday 2022

Today we mark the beginning of Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter. Easter being the most important festival in our Christian calendar, Lent is the time when we prepare ourselves for this occasion.

If we observe Easter in its true context, we should be making a new beginning at that time. It is a time when we can start again, turn over a new leaf. Easter is about new beginnings, but to make a fresh start, we have to first put behind us the present.

So Lent is a time when we recognise those things we need to put behind us. There is a word for this – *repentance*. This whole issue of repentance is central to our Christian faith. The word ‘repentance’ occurs 56 times in the New Testament.

The word we use to describe those things we need to put behind us is *sin*. There is a myriad of definitions for ‘sin’ but one simple definition is, ‘Anything which causes hurt to others, including God.’ Now the beauty of repentance is that these sins, which invariably are accompanied by a good dose of guilt, are erased; they are forgotten, and especially by God.

The story is told of a Catholic bishop who was upset because a woman in his diocese claimed to have daily conversations with Jesus. A little cult had grown up around her, and every day people gathered around her, prayed, sang hymns and said the rosary.

The bishop thought this was getting a little out of hand, so he went to visit the woman. He told her that while he knew she thought she was having conversations with Jesus, he was pretty much convinced that it was all part of her imagination. To prove the point, he said to her, ‘If Jesus is right here in this room with you now, and you can talk to him, then ask him to name the three sins I confessed this morning when I went to the confessional. After having what you believe to be a conversation with Jesus, if you can accurately name those sins, I might believe in what you say.’

The woman sat for a long while. Then she turned to the bishop, smiled and said, ‘I asked him but Jesus said, “I forgot.”’

We have a God who not only forgives, he forgets. He takes sin away from us and forgets it was ever ours in the first place. I find that hugely encouraging!

So Lent is a time when we focus on that process of repentance and forgiveness. And we acknowledge that with the imposition of ashes. Ashes are a traditional sign of penitence, a practice dating back to the Middle Ages. Thanks to COVID, we are unable to meet as a worshipping community to carry out this practice. I make this point – the imposition of ashes is an important part of our Anglican worship and history but it is an outward sign. What is really important is what takes place in our hearts.

So let us commit to the spirit of Lent. We do that through prayer, reading the Bible, and thinking about making some sort of sacrifice, either for self-improvement or for the welfare of others.