

Introducing Lent ...

Ash Wednesday marks the start of the season of Lent, one of the two great seasons of 'Waiting' (the other being Advent) for the Christian Church.

The 40-day period of Lent provides an opportunity for self-reflection and self-examination as we invite the Holy Spirit to re-shape us to the greater glory of the name of Jesus and his Kingdom.

This is the reason for the tradition of giving something up for Lent – not, as it seems to be regarded by some, as a sort of self-administered punishment; but rather a making of space to spend more time pursuing our relationship with our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Some parts of God's global church maintain the tradition of 'ashing' – the previous year's palm crosses are burnt and the ash used to mark the foreheads of believers with the sign of the cross, often with the words:

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.*

Lent, then, is an opportunity to reflect on our mortality (as palm crosses are reduced to ash, so we will one day return to the dust from which we were made) but at the same time a reminder of the act of special creation (Genesis 1) by which human beings were brought to life.

It also reminds us of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, being tested and tempted by the devil. At the core of his temptation was the invitation to step aside from the incarnation – his being made human. 'You've no need to experience hunger, like these mere mortals,' coos the devil. 'You created the atoms which form everything on the earth – you are free to rearrange them so that stones become bread.' And so on ...

In withstanding the devil's testing, Jesus embraced his humanity, without which the work of salvation could not have happened.

I hope you might approach Lent this year with that wider lens: far from being an old-fashioned rather miserable business, it's a season rooted in the deep themes of faith – Creation, Redemption, Sanctification.

And it ends with the wonderful Celebration of Easter which bring those themes into the sharpest focus – the God who made all things being himself made flesh; Redemption being fashioned in wood and nails; and the Spirit poured out by our Risen and Ascended Saviour to make us more like him in the world for which he died and to which he sends us.

Paul Langham, February 2018