

The Sacred Season of Lent (Year B)

Ash Wednesday

(17th February 2021)

Hymn: Praise to You O Christ our Saviour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mybxBzhONyU>

Once again, we arrive at the Sacred Season of Lent, some forty plus days of a spiritual campaign by which we arm ourselves with weapons of self-restraint, namely, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer is an intimate conversation with 'Our Father' in heaven, the listening to his Word and discerning his holy will for our life. Fasting is a preparation for the feast to come; an acceptance of the promise that our sadness will give way to joy. Almsgiving is a recognition that there are people, our brothers and sisters in the Lord, who are not as fortunate as we are, but share in the same heavenly inheritance that we do and must not be excluded from it.

The Season of Lent is a time of spiritual renewal like no other, it is a season of conversion. God is moved by acts of humility and responds with forgiveness to works of penance. Therefore: '*repent and believe in the Gospel*'. At some point during this season, we will wish to hear those comforting words of absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: '*God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit amongst us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace*', and then we hear the certainty of our forgiveness as we are absolved of our sins '*in the name of the father, and of the son and of the holy spirit*'.

Ash Wednesday is a public declaration of our sinfulness and that we are prepared to take responsibility for our actions so that we may be ready to celebrate the great Feast of Easter that is to come. Inspired by Christ's own forty days and forty nights in the desert we humble our hearts and deepen our communion with our God. It remains a praiseworthy practice to give something up for Lent, but ideally it should not be a vice as we should simply give these up, and not restart them on Easter Sunday. We are not giving something up because we need a detox like the well-intentioned Dry January. Instead, we give up something to appreciate more fully that Christ gave himself up for us so that we might have life and have it in abundance.

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There is no need to go round telling anyone what we are doing for Lent or ask another what they are giving up for Lent. The Ash is enough for us to know that someone has embarked on their own personal campaign of conversion. We need no applause, instead Our Father who sees everything that is done in secret will reward us at the appropriate time when we take our place at the feast in the Kingdom of heaven.

This Wednesday, then, we will be reminded of our mortality: '*remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*'. The Ashes will remind us that life is a free gift of God. Out of nothing He created the world, and out of the dust of the earth He created us. When our pilgrimage on earth is completed, our bodies will return to the earth and we look heavenwards for the salvation of our souls. *[Due to the pandemic and our precautions, mean you may experience the Roman custom of having the ash sprinkled over the top of your head, rather than by a paste on your forehead]*.

As St Paul reminds us, we are ambassadors for Christ, we are to carry his cross into the world. Being an ambassador is not simply a proclamation of words, but a sharing in the trials and priorities of the one whom we represent. This season, then, should also be a journey along the way of the cross, and in doing so, we are assured of passing-over with him, so that we join him in the garden of the Resurrection at Easter.

The Ashes that we place on our heads is a sign to the world that we are Christians and that we look forward to the salvation brought by Jesus Christ, who on the cross, pours out his blood for the forgiveness of sins. Lent, then, is a season of hope: '*Now is the favourable time, this is the day of salvation*'. If you are struggling, hungry, in mourning, in any kind of need, we are assured that there is to be a time of compassion to come; but it may not be immediate but in the eternal life to come.

Therefore, there remains a duty on us to make the corporal and spiritual works of mercy an integral part of our Lenten Journey. As ambassadors, we have a duty to announce the gospel so that others may come back to the Lord with all their heart, for on the last day we will share in Christ's resurrection, when the Lord '*will raise up in the flesh all those who have died and transform our lowly bodies after the pattern of his own glorious body*'. This will be the day when the Lord '*will wipe away every tear from our eyes, for we will see God face to face and be like him for all the ages*'. (EP3)

The Sacred Season of Lent (Year B)

1st Sunday of Lent B

(21st February 2021)

Hymn: Forty Days and Forty Nights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7JuNP8hMXY>

Other religions also record a ‘*great flood*’ in their sacred writings. It can easily be dismissed as a ‘*myth*’, but it is reasonable to assume sea levels have risen and fallen over the centuries; perhaps the ‘*great flood*’ is a thaw from an ancient ice age!?

A ‘*myth*’ is an oral tradition handed on from generation to generation. By the time it is written down, it has been greatly exaggerated in order to illustrate a point everyone can understand. It is natural for an ancient civilization to see an ‘*Extinction Level Event*’ as a punishment from the God, seeing only the ‘*righteous*’ being saved. What an indictment on humanity that only Noah was worthy of salvation!

The people of God, however, come to a radical understanding about God; that he does not desire our destruction; instead, he offers the hand of friendship. Our Lord himself said, ‘*I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father*’.

We recognize God as ‘*Father*’; we are created in his image and likeness. Even when ‘*through disobedience we had lost God’s friendship he did not abandon us to the domain of death*’. Instead, he ‘*came in mercy to the aid of all so that those who seek him might find him*’ (Eucharistic Prayer 4).

Time and again God offered covenants to humanity and through the prophets taught us to look forward to salvation. ‘*In the fullness of time God sent us his only Son, made incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, sharing our human nature in all things but sin*’.

He had the toughest of missions: *to proclaim the good news of salvation to the poor, to preach liberty to captives and to promise joy to those who were sorrowful of heart.*

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To prepare him for the harsh reality of his ministry, the Spirit ‘drove him’ into the wilderness. It is not a sign of resistance, only a sign of the closeness of relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By submitting to temptation, he shows us we do not need to be afraid of the devil.

In this Sacred Lenten Season, the spirit drives us out into the wilderness to prepare us for our own life in the Spirit. Our resolve to doing works of penance, fasting and almsgiving progresses us on the path to holiness. Lent is a journey along the ‘way of the Cross’. Rather than wiping out a sinful humanity, Christ shows the depth of his love. Christ has died for our sins, once and for all, commanding we gather for the Eucharist, so we take station at the foot of the cross, which is the tree of life for us.

The ‘great flood’ foreshadows Christian baptism; an explanation of the washing away of sin, personal and original, as we are plunged into the waters of rebirth. We die with Christ, and as the flood waters reside, we rise to new life, becoming a new creation in Christ. Like Noah, each Christian, is singled out and welcomed into the ‘ark’ of the Church (*look up at the ceiling in St Mary Magdalene and note it looks like an upturned ship’s hull*).

It is still reassuring to see the rainbow after a ‘heavenly’ downpour. It remains a metaphor for God’s desire that humanity will choose salvation. It is also a sign of Christ, risen high above the clouds, seated at the Father’s right hand, who will come again in glory.

As individuals and a society, we still commit countless offences against God. Lent is a time to put our house in order:

‘the time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News’.

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2nd Sunday of Lent B (Transfiguration Sunday)
(28th February 2021)

Hymn: All ye who seek a comfort sure

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSXI3OA-ePU>

A quarter way through Lent and there are three possibilities with our Lenten Penances.

One: *still going strong*; **Two:** *we have failed already* or **Three:** *we have yet to start*. If you are option two or three, you, like the disciples, need to be taken up the Holy Mountain for him to show you why the Messiah must suffer and die.

At his incarnation, Christ freely gives up his divine glory, fully immersing himself in the human condition. He tabernacles himself or pitches his tent among us. His not sinning shows that sin is not being part of authentic human living; that is what he's come to destroy; thus, opening up the way from death into life.

The **Transfiguration** manifests the divine glory that, as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is his by right; something Jesus does not need to grasp at, like '*Adam and Eve*' tried to do. No wonder Peter wants to pitch three tents to hold onto this '*wonderful*' experience of being in the presence of God and the holy prophets.

But Peter is not destined to hold onto Christ; he is to be an apostle (*one who is sent*). Before this can happen, Christ shows them how the testimony of the law and the prophets demonstrate that the Passion leads to the glory of the Resurrection, and thus the hope of eternal life, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God provides graces to obtain this blessed reality, but we must place all our confidence in knowing he loves us and desires our salvation. We recognize that '*the sufferings of this present age and not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed*'.

Such a mind-set allows Abraham to respond to God's unusual request. In the end, God intervenes, because Abraham's good intention was sufficient for God - *but is not the road to hell paved with good intentions?!* Abraham's intention was sincere; grounded in firm faith; ours clouded by worldly worries.

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We might not be asked to sacrifice our sons and daughters, but we might be asked not to stand in the way of a potential vocation. Abraham recognized that a child of God belongs to him; we have been claimed for Christ our Saviour by the sign of his cross, an indelible mark on our souls.

Like Isaac, God's elect emerge unscathed and victorious from the world's oppression – but not by our own merits. The Father tells us, '***this is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him***'. Being '*spiritual*' is not enough, we are called to trust Christ, crucified, risen and seated at the Father's right hand. Life is always and everywhere a choice for or against Christ in everything we say and do.

And that is the crux of all our choices in life. Yes, we may be motivated by personal finances, but we should be prepared to give up such benefits for the sake of the gospel, prepared to lay down our life to ensure our society is marked by '*a culture of life*' and '*not a culture of death*'.

We live in and engage with the world, but we are not of the world, certainly not one confused by lust and disobedience, one which is more excited over '*racy period dramas on Netflix*', rather than the dazzling whiteness of purity seen in our baptismal garment; itself a sign of our own **transfiguration** in baptism, where we died with Christ and rose with him to new life. It is a *metamorphosis*, taking us beyond the form of our birth, making us a new creation; a necessary step; for '*unless we are reborn by water and the Holy Spirit, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven*'.

Our Lenten Penances are, then, a real way to unite ourselves to '*the way of the cross*' and to our brothers and sisters who are in need. And '*with God on our side who can be against us?*'

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3rd Sunday of Lent B

(7th March 2021)

Hymn: God of Mercy and Compassion

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4W_CLRW9Lo

In pondering '*what would Jesus do?*' in any situation, we must conclude from this Sunday's gospel that making a whip out of a cord and driving us out of the temple is a distinct possibility. That should not give anyone license, however, to smash up the parish repository!

History is written by the victor who imposes his code on the vanquished. Acceptance is not normally a sign of freedom, but of fear and oppression. However, in contrast God's commandments are an expression of love because he has liberated his people from slavery in Egypt. The obligations are based, not on defeat, but upon deliverance. They express covenant and relationship; accepting the Commandments as the bedrock of our moral code is a sign of a maturity that humanity could not achieve on its own.

The Commandments radically change humanity's common understanding about God. There are not multiple Gods; this is not a case that '*my god is better than your god*', but the astonishing revelation that there is only one God, living and true. He is, though, a jealous God; worship of anyone or anything else is idol worship, to be avoided.

Christ expounds our appreciation of the one God, as three divine persons: *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, in perfect communion; they invite us into that heavenly relationship. Christ's action is a bold statement of his authority. The Temple is not God's house; it is his Father's house! That is how intimate his relationship is with the God of Israel.

In Jesus, the fullness of divinity dwells; he is the full presence of God on earth; the true Temple. Following the Ascension that special presence remains in the Blessed Sacrament and is given to us in Holy Communion and reserved for our Adoration.

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Worldly people struggle to see a sacrificial death as the way to salvation because to them, God, by definition, must be all-powerful; that it is a nonsense for him to make himself vulnerable. Christians, though, understand that God *goes to hell and back* for the sake of one he has created. Human wisdom cannot grasp God's wisdom, needing signs and rational evidence. Such attitudes impose limits on God's revelation.

Jesus performed many signs, but the people struggled to put their faith in him. So, what does Jesus do? Christ gives the ultimate sign, his Resurrection. Many, even if they do not practice regularly, are drawn to the commemoration of Our Lord's Passion on Good Friday. We hope many will not choose to end the story at that point and will continue journeying with Christ in his '*Passover*' from death to life at the Easter Vigil.

The Temple authorities should have been '*jealous for the Lord*', dedicating their lives to his service in prayer – instead, they had forgotten that Commandments are the basis of Covenant relationship. If we reduce the Commandments just to a moral code among others means we are tempted to manipulate them to suit our own needs and desires. Perhaps, we try to lessen their significance over the passage of time and think that in bringing the Church into 21st Century, there may be some wriggle room.

It is easy to cite a reason why a particular Commandment does not hold as absolute: (e.g., *self-defence* for '*do not kill*' or *poverty* for '*do not steal*'), but this is about our culpability, rather than making the action 'good' or 'loving'. By going to the Temple, Jesus shows his respect for the law and He asks us to go deeper: '*you have heard it said, "Do not commit adultery", but I say to you, "everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in her heart".*

This Sunday we are invited to renew our appreciation for the Commandments; do not see them as the last word for life, but as a *starter for ten*, in our relationship with God and neighbour and they are still a perfect basis for our examination of conscience before Confession.

For those who love Christ, he does not drive us from his Father's house; instead, prepares a place for us and '*Zeal for our Father's house consumes me*'.

The Sacred Season of Lent (Year B)

4th Sunday of Lent B (Laetare Sunday)

(14th March 2021)

Hymn: At the cross her station keeping

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkHlwAhi4NE>

The comedian Peter Kay once joked, ‘*if it’s not one thing, it’s your mother*’. Today, we rightly celebrate our mums, but today is more fittingly called ‘*Mothering Sunday*’; whereas ‘*Mother’s Day*’ is another commercial import.

On ‘*Mothering Sunday*’, those in domestic service were given a day off to visit their Mother Church, the Cathedral, or the parish Church of their baptism. On the way they would pick flowers to place at the altar and give to their own mothers.

We also give thanks for ‘*Holy Mother Church*’. The Church is Mother because she is the ‘*Bride of Christ*’. She dispenses the graces of Jesus Christ. Just as we came to life through our mothers, through the baptismal font, we come to new life in Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again so we might have life in abundance.

Through Word and Sacrament, the Church continues to preach the truth of the Gospel, calling us out of darkness into the light of Christ; encouraging us to be pillars of holiness. By the witness of countless saints and holy men and women, she is a source of inspiration even to the extent that we might lay down our lives so others might know the good news of salvation.

Mother Church nurtures us so we might always choose ‘good’ and be vigilant against evil and deceit, providing encouragement to overcome the difficult moments of life with courage and hope. She implores us to see Christ in our brother and sisters, inviting us to be welcoming, forgiving, and trusting of others.

The 4th Sunday of Lent is also called ‘*Laetare*’ Sunday. The entrance antiphon for the Mass is: “***Laetare Jerusalem***” – ***Rejoice, O Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.***

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Today, we take a breather from the rigors of Lent, reminding ourselves why we gather each Sunday. The dazzling white of Easter radiates into the penitential purple, bleaching it a shade of Rose (*honestly, it is not meant to be pink!*)

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life”. The cross demonstrates God's supreme love for us; only through Christ do we have life - for no other reason did he come, except to save the world.

His final words on the cross '*it is accomplished*' mean that he has opened for us the gates of heaven. Now we pray for our own personal salvation.

Salvation is not achieved by our own merits, but through the mercy of God. Rather than give us his just punishment, he offers forgiveness to all who return to him with a sincere heart. The good thief was the first to experience Christ's mercy, recognizing both his wrong-doing and Christ as his only hope for salvation.

At times, Mother Church lets us down and we can become estranged from her love. Christ, always, remains the head of the Church of which he is saviour. He loves the Church and gives himself up for her.

Pray, therefore, for our Mother, the *holy Catholic Church... that God be pleased to grant her peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole world*. Pray for her shepherds, Francis our Pope, Richard our Bishop, and all those who hand on the Catholic and Apostolic Faith.

Finally, we also sing a special 'Ave' to Mary our Mother, who taking station at the foot of the cross, was given to us '*that we might hope still more*'.

The Sacred Season of Lent (Year B)

5th Sunday of Lent B / Passiontide

(21st March 2021)

Hymn: Lord Jesus think on me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBxgppN80iE>

It is in the heart that our deepest desire is found. If we do not desire something with our heart, then our response will always be lukewarm.

The Old Covenant was carved on stone because the people's hearts were too hard. The New Covenant is written in the very core of our being. At baptism, an indelible mark is left on our souls to show we have been claimed by Christ our Saviour.

The covenant is heartfelt because it is not based on a series of rules and obligations but in relationship with Christ Jesus, who invites us into that intimate communion he has with his Father, in unity with the Holy Spirit.

It has pleased God to gather us as His holy people. He wills our salvation, from the least to the great; no-one is outside the mercy of God, but it is in the heart that that a person decides whether they are for or against God. Christ, tells us, '*I am standing at the door [of your heart], knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me (Rev 3:20).*'

To be incorporated into the New Covenant, one must be an obedient servant, who in imitation of Christ, offers their life as a ransom for many. Christ understands obedience from all eternity; his will perfectly attuned to his Father's will. We worry that obedience might impinge of our freedom, whereas listening and discerning God's will, is always the source of a joyful and blessed life.

Obedience brings us to perfection, the fullness of relationship with God the Father. Jesus, in his humanity, embraces his Father's love for his children. In going to the cross, he demonstrates that he loves us to the end. In accepting death on a cross, he recognizes the type of service he is asked to give, that of a suffering servant.

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The low point is Gethsemane, where his suffering becomes an agony. Yet even ‘*being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Lk 22:44)*’. Although, it is hard for us to appreciate, in our own suffering there is a concealed power that draws us closer to Christ.

While on earth Christ offered up prayer and supplications. On the cross he becomes both priest and victim. The sacrifice he offers as high priest is offered once for the forgiveness of sin. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we recognize that same cross as the source of our eternal salvation.

In humbling himself, the low point becomes the highest point. He who set aside his royal dignity for those he loves is raised from the dead and given the name which is above all names; *that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9b, 10a, 11b)*

He was lifted up to draw all people to himself. Others approach us in order to ‘see Jesus’, because an authentic follower of Christ is eager to live with Jesus and be like him. The new and eternal covenant is, therefore, the source of our hope, that for a Christian at death, life is changed, not ended. When this earthly temple turns to dust, a new dwelling place, in our true home of heaven, is made ready for us.

This Lent we renew our efforts to seek Jesus, to find him, to get to know him and to love him:

‘I love you Jesus my love above all things, I repent with my whole heart of having offended you. Never permit me to separate myself from you again and grant that I may love you always, then do with me what you will’.

Palm Sunday & Holy Week to be considered separately and nearer the time