

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

A sermon preached at the Low Mass in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, on Wednesday, 14 February 2024 (Ash Wednesday), by The Right Reverend Peter Wheatley, sometime Bishop of Edmonton

'For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God.' (2 CORINTHIANS 5.21)

We live in the world context of the war in Ukraine, climate change, pollution of the environment, an increasing loss of biological species, extremes of wealth and poverty in the world, and greed and corruption, whether it is buildings that go up in flames at Grenfell Tower or which collapse in earthquake areas.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by all this. But God the Father is the source of a good creation. The whole world is in need of repentance. God's new way of dealing with this was to start with one person, Jesus Christ. St Paul puts it in our Second Reading: 'for our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God.' That's an extraordinary claim. We are Jesus's followers and we are 'becoming God's goodness.' We are part of a team, called the Church. Like a football team, we need to train. On Ash Wednesday, we take a chance to look at the training we need.

At the start of training for the football season, the team often needs to lose some weight gained during the summer. Our Ash Wednesday liturgy helps us to drop the weight of sin and sorrow. We are called to penitence. How loving and charitable are we? How honest and truthful? I am sorry, God, but I know you love me.

Then, in today's Gospel, Jesus suggests prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Traditionally, Lent has been about what we give up.

And, certainly, that is one way – sacrificing a pleasure to remind ourselves that Our Lord made a sacrifice of his life. But if you look at these, they can be as much about things we might do as about things we might give up.

Prayer can be about what we might do more, as well as about what we might do less. Yes – it might be about coming to an extra Mass during the week – or Stations of the Cross on Friday. Or it might be about making sure we do have a little time for prayer each day. If you take the Sunday's reading home, perhaps read a little piece each day. Just allow a sentence or phrase to become our prayer for today or tomorrow. Prayer can be about setting time aside just to be quiet and receive from God rather than constantly be talking to Him – perhaps just a minimal repeated prayer so as to be more than distracted daydreaming.

Fasting can be allied with almsgiving – giving up something and giving the money saved to a good cause. Giving money regularly for the Church and charities is in itself important and our Lenten discipline may be just to make sure we do this. But we can widen this out to thinking about how generous we are in terms of the time we give to others - who may be lonely and welcome seeing us.

The world is not as it should be. We go into training as a team, 'becoming the goodness of God' in the world. Today we renew the prayer: Lord, change the world - and begin with me.