

This coming Wednesday is Valentine's day... a day to celebrate love. And give cards and flowers and chocolates and jewellery. It is a fairly commercial holiday. But there is a Christian basis to it – it is, of course, St Valentine's day. St Valentine was a 3rd century AD Roman saint – he's the patron saint of the city of Terni in Italy, of epilepsy and beekeepers. He was a bishop on the Roman empire, and he ministered to persecuted Christians. Ultimately, he was martyred on February 14th, AD 269.

His legacy is a commercial celebration that 1 in 3 Australians will actively take part in. Florists will do well. Anyone selling chocolates or cards will do well.

But this coming Wednesday is also Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is not a commercial celebration, but it is an important day in the calendar of the church.

We pray a prayer of confession every week in church, where we acknowledge our sins, but the tradition on Ash Wednesday goes even further. We reflect that we are a tiny part of God's creation – a tiny and imperfect part.

Traditionally, as you receive mark of the ashes, the person applying them says "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

It is a reminder that without God, without Jesus, our lives will end.

But in the face of that, we are reminded that God is loving and merciful and always ready to accept us just as we are... And that however tiny and however imperfect we may be, God loves us with an incredible unbreakable love... a love so great, that God gave up his son for us.

The tradition of 'giving up something for Lent' as we journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter, serves to remind us of our human natures, and of God's great love for us shown in Jesus. Giving up something – or taking on a spiritual discipline – serves as a reminder of the importance of spiritual growth and reflection. Using those practices, we can deepen our faith, strengthen our relationship with God, and live more meaningful and purposeful lives – but only if we do more than simply fast or give up: we need to allow our hearts and our lives to be changed,

There's a story of a new teacher arriving at a church school at the start of Lent, and in the staff room, across the top of the blackboard was written "What are you giving up for lent?"

Underneath, the teachers had written what they were giving up: Coffee, chocolate, alcohol and so on... and at the bottom, in large letters, someone had written "OFFAL".

Well, why not? If you're expected to give up something, and you get to choose, why not give up something you don't want in the first place?

Or maybe I could instead give up something I like, but substitute something else for it - I could give up my Monday morning large mocha at JJ's – I could just have a cappuccino or a latte instead! Or I could stop drinking beer, and drink cider instead!

And if you think any of those ideas are a terribly cynical approach, then maybe you should go the other way, and actually fast. Give up food for lent. That'll show not only people who give up something they don't like, and those who substitute one thing for another, but also people who only give up coffee or chocolate or alcohol for lent. That'll show them, won't it?

In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah is speaking the word of God – that's the job of a prophet. Isaiah tells the people what God sees and what God thinks about what God sees. He begins by letting them know how he regards their outwardly religious activity – it looks okay, but there is nothing

underneath... God's assessment of their activity, in verse 1, is that it is actually rebellion; it's rejecting what God actually wants – which isn't outward signs, it's inner change.

In verse 2, God lets the people know through Isaiah that he is not fooled by their charade of humility. Their act amounts to nothing in his sight because he sees the intent of their hearts. "They seem eager..." but the truth is not hidden from God's eyes. The people set out to fool God, but ultimately only succeed in deceiving themselves into believing that they're doing all that it needed.

In Leviticus 16:29, Moses commanded the people to observe a fast on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – was established as a time when the Israelites were to recognize their own sinfulness and their separation from God. It was to be a day of humbling themselves before God and seeking God's forgiveness.

But over time, they had come to have more confidence in the act of worship than in the originally intended object of their worship – God who'd saved them. They thought that the better their worship, the more God would look after them.

Unfortunately, we often find ourselves doing the same kinds of things that the people of Israel did. "I did this for you, God, now it's your turn to do something for me." Sometimes we even turn it around: God, if you'll do this thing for me, I'll do something for you.

So, by Isaiah's time, the act of fasting made no real impact on the lives of the people. It was merely a ritual without of any real significance to their lives.

The truth is that fasting that doesn't change you is worthless. It's like so many things we do – if we go buy a new exercise bike but don't ride it, it's not going to make you fitter, if you get a new cookbook but don't cook anything from it, it's not much use. And if we give up offal for lent, or give up one sort of coffee for another or take up drinking hot chocolate instead – well, really, what's the point? You may not notice the difference at all.

And if you do notice the difference, it may not be a helpful one. One of the natural side effects of going without food, or sugar, or caffeine is a tendency to become easily irritated, especially when your focus is in the wrong place – when you're focusing on the act of fasting rather than on God. That's what happened to the Israelites: verse 4 "Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists."

This is obviously not what God had intended fasting to be.

Putting on sackcloth and ashes was intended to symbolize humility and true repentance before God. It was meant to be an external sign of an inward condition. You might remember the story of the repentant Ninevites wearing sackcloth after Jonah had brought God's warning to them, and they'd decided to change their ways. But the people of Judah that Isaiah was preaching to had turned that act of humility into nothing more than a ritual.

They thought that if they put on sackcloth and ashes, God would consider that they were mourning... but just like fasting was an outward sign of an inner change, so were the ashes – you were supposed to take on ashes because you were repenting... not so people – or God – would think you were.

Verses 6 and 7 tell us what God expects of fasting:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the

hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

The effects of the fasting that God calls his people to go beyond the people who fast. The fasting leads to change, not only in their own lives, but in their communities and ultimately in the world; the contemporary Lent Event shows this – people going without donate the money for whatever it is they fasting from, and that money goes to help those in need.

But the effect need not be through the Lent Event, it need not even be through giving money. In fact we need to make sure that the money doesn't become the focus. Instead, it can be a change in our lives, a change in the life of the church, and ultimately, a change in the way our society – and our world – works.

In all of these things God is not asking us to give other people our surplus. God's ideal is for His people to be characterized by sharing. Sharing is not the same thing as giving a donation. Sharing involves dividing what is ours with others. Sharing implies personal contact and the establishment of relationships. It may mean that we have to go without something in order that others may have something.

Similarly, we shouldn't think that covering the naked is simply an opportunity for us to clean out our wardrobes and get rid of all our old and slightly worn clothing. It means giving what we would desire to receive if we were in their shoes.

Isaiah gives us some very concrete examples of what fasting should be, but they are examples: the point is that however we choose to fast, our hearts and minds must be focused on God.

The last verses of the reading tell us the effects for God's people of fasting the way that God wants them to:

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

¹¹ The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Isaiah links the results to the actions. If you do away with ... if you spend yourselves....

The first result is that the love of God will shine through us. The word light is used to symbolize God's love. His love is light to those who receive it. As I said in our communion liturgy last week "May we who the spirit lights be a light to the world".

We might not have an Ash Wednesday service, and we might not ritually don sackcloth and ashes, but we do need to think about our own worship. We come to church. We sing some hymns. Hear the bible. Hear a sermon. Say some prayers. All good stuff – but does it change us? Are we going through the motions, or are we opening our hearts to God?

Darlene Zschech was one of the first worship leaders of Hillsong Church, and she was famous for leading some of great worship songs of the last thirty years. But she said this: "Worship is more than singing beautiful songs in church on a Sunday. It is more than instruments and music. As a true worshipper, your heart will long to worship Him at all times, in all ways, and with all your life."

If we fast the way God wants, we will be filled by the presence of God, and we have the assurance that God is with us and does hear us. Not only does he hear, but he also answers our cries. What strength we can find in these words, of verse 9 "Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I." What more could we want?

God will be with us.

And God is with us in Jesus. Jesus who reached out to us when we had it all wrong, when we were like the ancient Israelites and thought that we could solve the problems of the world for ourselves.

Jesus who died for us, Jesus who rose from the dead for us. Jesus who calls us to follow him.

Jesus who confirmed the words of Isaiah as we heard in today's gospel reading: And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites... And whenever you fast, do not look sombre, like the hypocrites... Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

If we treasure God's love, if we treasure Jesus, there our hearts will be.

Amen