

Sermon for the start of Lent 2019 Canon Michael Webb

What a topsy-turvy world! The last week of February was as warm as early summer and yet we are still three days from the start of Lent. Lent. How do you feel about another 6 weeks of Lent?

Some cultures treat the approach of Lent with lots of fun. It's time for Carnival – the clue is in the Latin word carne for meat. A time to eat, celebrate and party. So it's Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, a chance to eat up all the food that will be gone without till Easter. OK we have a bit of that here in our typically British way – we make pancakes!! And run around tossing them in the air (best place?). Some places like Alnwick have great inter-parish football games (not Premier League) which range through the town with dozens on each side and only end when the ball goes over the river. But what do we call this celebration not Fat Tuesday but Shrove Tuesday. A day when people went to confession and were shriven of their sins.

Does this say something about our culture and maybe too about how we look on Lent. A negative time, going without, giving up. Some of us dread it so much that we don't even observe the season of Lent at all. How often have your clergy exhorted you to fast and abstain? Did we tell you that in C/E there is also a day of fasting before Christmas, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, before 11 saint's days, 12 Ember days, 3 Rogation days and every Friday? 82 days plus Lent.

It's all been forgotten. But other religions and Christian churches have extensive times of fasting and embrace it with positivity. The visit of our Muslim friends last May reminded us that fasting is one of the 5 pillars of Islam and that in Ramadan they touch no food or drink for 11- 16 hours between sunrise and sunset each day for a month. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity the rules forbid meat or animal products, cheese or milk, wine or oil not only in Lent, but for several weeks in mid-summer, 2 weeks in August and the 40 days of Advent. Of course not everyone can or does

fast but it is seen as a joyful opportunity to lessen the pull of earthly pleasures so that they may grow closer in joy to God.

So I want to encourage you to look forward joyfully and positively to the next six weeks off Lent and to see it as an exciting journey of faith and exploration into God. Perhaps our fellow believers can help us see it all with positive eyes. Take the Greek Orthodox church which begins Lent not with **Ash** Wednesday but with **Clean Monday**. Not just a brighter word but a difference of emphasis. Ours is rightly on penitence and mortality (dust you are) and true of every branch of the faith. But in Greece they are encouraged to go to the hills and fly kites. The start of Lent is about the freedom that God gives us (from sin, from consumerism, from failure) and associates with adventure, exploration, new initiatives and hope. The encouragement is for us to see this as a time of spiritual development and the adventure of discovering where God is leading us – a time to learn, to grow, to change. No coincidence that in N Hemisphere Lent occurs in springtime (OE means Spring) where we see blossom and hear birdsong – a time for our faith to flower and be beautiful for God. Hope you will take up opportunities offered in parish, online and in books to get growing!

And may I offer you another way to use the whole idea of Lenten fasting and abstinence positively too? Many of us are deeply concerned about global warming. Hot February/Australia! (Some 20% of congregation recently went to a conference on saving the planet.) Can we turn our Lenten fasting into a care for the earth? May cutting down on our consumption not just of food but of energy, petrol, the internet, clothes or books be a way for us to walk more gently on the earth? We have become more and more aware of the drastic and urgent need to help to save our planet for generations still unborn. We cannot make grand gestures but **together** we can make a difference. Some of may feel able to join the parish environment group and do some practical work to help us become an eco-church. In the autumn we shall have a series of sermons on living simply that the earth may simply live. But in the meantime, here are a few suggestions for ways this

Lent fast can make a difference. We can: watch for the weekly Eco tip on the pewsheet and see if we can put it into practice. We can: become more aware of our carbon footprint (calculators are easy to access) and see if there are ways we can reduce our individual and corporate effect on Planet Earth. So we could reduce the numbers of days we eat red meat or consume cheese whose production is a huge contributor to greenhouse gases. We can use the car less and walk for short journeys or take the train for longer trips and see more of the beauty of the earth. We can cut our spending by fixing not replacing perhaps supporting the monthly repair shop locally. All small things perhaps but done by us all they can make a difference to our home on earth.

And they can be a way to accept the ancient disciplines of Lent in a fresh and positive way, a way that lightens our walk upon the earth and better prepares us for Easter by making the next 40 days a real adventure, a real, joyous springtime of the soul and a closer walk with God, our Creator and Redeemer. In the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew records Jesus expecting that his followers will fast and gives these positive instructions 'Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' May you have a blessed and exciting Lent. Amen