

Ash Wednesday is on 6<sup>th</sup> March this year.

Discussions in our house around what we are giving up for Lent started around Christmas-time. My 12-year-old daughter has decided that she is going to use Lent to test out whether she is suited to being a vegetarian by giving up meat and fish and has requested that I join her with this. After giving it some thought, I decided that I **might** give up meat but not fish (pescatarianism rather than vegetarianism) but almost immediately, started to think of times that I might “cheat” (as a birthday treat I am going to a Michelin-star restaurant for a tasting menu and of course it would be rude not to sample everything on offer).

Over the past couple of years, I have attempted to give things up for Lent – takeaways, chocolate, fizzy drinks and most recently Facebook. I imagine that this year, millions of people will be giving something up; whether cake, crisps, alcohol, coffee, swearing, social media or some other thing . They will do it in the name of fasting in order to replicate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ’s journey into the desert for 40 days. Self-denial, whether of menial or luxuriant things, is a much overlooked virtue. So it’s a positive that people, in the name of God or their faith, are trying to give up something for Lent.

I wonder, sometimes, however, whether a sense of piety over giving up something for Lent can keep us from taking a hard look at what God really wants us to be doing.

The translation of Isaiah 58:6-7, in The Message says this –

“This is the kind of fast day I’m after:  
to break the chains of injustice,  
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,  
free the oppressed,  
cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:  
sharing your food with the hungry,  
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,  
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,  
being available to your own families.”

It is great to do something for God. It is great to remember the sacrifice that Christ made for us but if we give something up, without taking something up, does this bring us closer to God? I have to say

that my previous attempts at giving up chocolate have probably just made me a bit grumpy and my attempts to give up Facebook probably just resulted in me spending time on other websites and then bingeing on social media when Lent was over.

Perhaps we should give things up, in order to make room to take things up. Give up something that is getting in the way of our relationship with God and take up something that brings us closer to God.

If we give up chocolate, maybe we should give up chocolate that is made on the backs of the working poor. Give up chocolate that enslaves children and puts them in dangerous working conditions. And take up Fair-Trade chocolate.

If we give up Facebook maybe we should take up a pen and piece of paper and a stamp, and write a note to a friend, a loved one, someone sick, or someone lonely.

If we give up spending our evenings as a family staring at the television, maybe we should take up having conversations about faith, take up reading the Bible together, take up praying together.

We are encouraged to give up oppression, give up resentment, give up fear. And take up justice, take up reconciliation, take up love.

Then when we get to Easter, we can look back and know that this Lent, not only did we give something up, but we took up something that brought us closer to God – now someone pass me a bacon cob please (but don't tell my daughter)!

God Bless,

Danielle

Reader at St James Church.