

ASH WEDNESDAY

It is good to be here; no-one says any different that it is not good, but for me it is good. Not only to be with my former colleague, Father Bob, and Penny, but also because for three years, in the late 1970s, I was Director of the project All Faiths For One Race, under the leadership of the late Professor John Hick working from the Lozells Social Development Centre on the Lozells Road. At the same time, I was Assistant Priest at Holy Trinity, Birchfield working with Father Barry Thorley. It was a time of confrontation against racism and fascism, and the promotion of multi-cultural education. I also chaired the national organisation, Christians Against Racism and Fascism from Lozells, an organisation whose time has come again. Many of us thought that such challenges had become redundant in the twenty-first century but have now come to realise that in many supposedly democratic countries the spectre of endemic and systematic racism with signs of fascist ideology are on the rise again. Such are easily recognised in immigration policies both in the United States and sadly the United Kingdom also. The scandals of Windrush and the hostile environment towards migrants are indicative of this trend and must be resisted by people of faith and goodwill.

But now to Lent and this first day, Ash Wednesday. However, I would suggest that a Lenten observance and the consequence of such is not unconnected with the picture I painted about the threats of racism and fascism. It is often assumed that Lent represents a time of frugality or giving things up, often the impossible whether such be chocolate, alcohol or perhaps for Father Bob and myself the indulgence of purified Scottish water! The Church signifies the restraint associated with the season by giving up flowers in Church, the omission of the Gloria at the Eucharist and the elimination of the acclamation 'Alleluia'. The late Bishop Michael Perham of Gloucester once said that 'Alleluias' should cascade from heaven on Easter Day. The giving up of relative trivia often comes fairly easily, although whisky for myself would be a challenge. Such does not represent a significant denial appropriate to the season. To counter this, many suggest that rather than giving things up, one should take things up. This can be evidenced in charitable giving and activity, joining campaigns, or other demanding tasks. Even then, do such works really represent a challenge that could be evidenced in true repentance, *metanoia*, turning around, something new and demanding? This evening I would want

to suggest something that should concern us all, but which inevitably and necessarily makes a significant demand for lifestyle change and would be an appropriate Lenten discipline and practice. Furthermore, such would have longer term implications for all of us, and especially the Church in its Godly mission to the world. I am, of course, referring to the issue of climate change, our understanding of what is happening, our shared concern and our willingness to effect practices and policies that really make a difference for the life of the planet, the lives of those most at risk, our children's lives and those of ourselves. There is much rhetoric concerning climate change and there are those who deny the reality despite the scientific and visual evidence, not least the fires in Australia, the melting polar caps and the increased adverse weather conditions closer to home. Donald Trump is one of the worst offenders, as the United States' withdraws from the Paris Agreement. The deforestation of the rainforests in order to increase wealth, often not for ordinary people but for fascist inclined oligarchs is another offense and affront to the planet. What might some of these challenges mean for us as a Lenten observance and witness? Less journeys by car with more walking, public transport and cycling would be helpful and would also have a fitness benefit. Less flights and more trains, perhaps following one of the great prophets of climate change challenge, Greta Thunberg, would have considerable impact. Turning the heating down and choosing renewable tariffs would support the further development of renewable heat resources. Fr Bob is aware of what we achieved at St Catherine's, Burbage with a ground source underfloor heating system, taking heat from 130 metres underground. These things are a challenge, but not too much of a challenge as there would be little negative impact upon our lives. Of greater challenge would be our eating habits and the vast quantity of meat consumed with the attendant change in agricultural and environmental practice. Of course, it could be noted that fasting is a Lenten discipline and a change in diet would be a good way to observe the rigour of the season, although continuation beyond the traditional lamb at Easter would be true *metanoia*. Today the organisation Extinction Rebellion is launching a 40 Days of Action campaign, encouraging people to reflect on the environmental consequences of their actions in a kind of green Lent. This is a prophetic witness that we should all support.

There are some ominous warnings and challenges in our readings this evening. The prophet Joel warns of a day of darkness and gloom and calls for the rending of hearts and returning to the Lord with fasting, weeping and mourning. Most scholars suggest that the powerful army he refers to is a plague of locusts, and such is evidenced today in East Africa with devastating consequences. The implication is clear, and the requirement is stated with the prayer for the sparing of people and the need to affirm God. Paul in the 2nd letter to the Corinthians also refers to the day of salvation, although in this case it represents the return of Christ, but with the plea to be reconciled to God and to become the righteousness of God, a very Jewish aspiration. A Lenten observance focused on the issue and demand of climate change, whilst unknown to the early Christians in Corinth, would certainly be within the spirit of Paul's message. The Gospel reading from John is interesting in the first instance because most scholars affirm that it was not original to the rest of the gospel. Why and how did it find its way into the fourth gospel? There were stories on this theme current in several forms at an early date but did not attain canonical status because they seemed inconsistent with the strict disciplinary treatment of adultery then customary. For example, there was a similar story in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, dated in the 3rd century, which was used to caution bishops against too great a severity in dealing with penitents (useful advice for our fathers in God!). The point that many observe is that the story represents something that was consistent with the life, teaching and practice of Jesus. Like many other accounts in the New Testament, it doesn't really matter whether it was true or genuine, but the fact that it was recognisably consistent. The message is clear, especially for those who are unable or incapable both of forgiveness or enough self-analysis to perceive one's own sinfulness and shortcomings. The logic of its placing at this point is obvious from verses 15 following about judgement and Jesus' affirmation that he judges no-one. However, there is one other aspect to this story that I would want to suggest. The Jesus we encounter in the gospels was no lover of religion. Given that religion, even within our own day, is about rules, Jesus was a rule breaker. Healing on the sabbath, identifying a Samaritan as fulfilling the purposes of God, welcoming the prodigal son, forgiving unto 70 times 7, and resisting judgement are some examples. Religion is the opposite of a love based and trusting faith. Furthermore, as Bishop Richard Holloway points out in his autobiography, *'Leaving Alexandria'*, the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty.

Let me return to what I believe ought to be our Lenten focus this year and beyond into our everyday lives throughout the ensuing years. Climate change presents humanity with its biggest challenge. Are we as a race able to change sufficiently, to practice *metanoia*, to reverse the cataclysmic damage we have already done to the planet in order to preserve our God given lives into the future for our children and grandchildren? The novelist Robert Harris has recently written a book entitled '*The Second Sleep*' which details life after an environmental reversal of progress and civilisation with the reversal of time to almost primitive levels (it also involves the murder of a priest!). In another book published this month, '*Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*' by the theoretical physicist, Brian Greene, who reminds us that whereas we cannot go backwards in time, we can go forward. For example, if you were to spend a year near the edge of a black hole and you could return to earth it would be a billion years later. Or if you go out on a rocket near the speed of light for 6 months, and turn around and come back, and depending on how close to the speed of light you travelled, when you return it'll be thousands or millions or billions of years into the future. What then would we see and experience? Would our beautiful and fragile planet and life itself be decimated by our inability to address the challenge of climate change? If not, might we still be people, that following the rules of religion, rush to judgement on others who may not be like or behave like ourselves and have descended into a dystopian way of life that might be populist but certainly not loving or caring? Perhaps the lesson of Lent is that we address seriously, socially and politically the real challenges that face humanity and not the fantasies that currently pre-occupy the minds and actions of politicians and those with authority, including the Church, to change; to effect, in other words, *metanoia*.

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