

*Dear All,*

*This month sees the beginning of the season of Lent and therefore it seems appropriate to say something about it and indeed what it should mean to us. The word Lent is actually the Old English term for Quadragesima, which refers to the fortieth fasting day before Easter and latterly identifies this whole period up to Easter.*

*We begin with Ash Wednesday and in the services on this day mark all comers with an ash cross on their foreheads, using the words, 'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.' This statement very much setting the context of what our Lenten observance should be about. Firstly, we should recognise that we are God's created beings and that everything we enjoy in life is through his outpouring of love and giving in the miracle and wonder of creation. It is all too easy in our advancing technological age to assume we are all knowing and in control, and yet we would do well to remember we are but dust and that for all our cleverness the gift of life is the most precious thing we have and that this is God given. The second part of, 'turning away from sin' and about 'being faithful to Christ' is the more challenging aspect of Lent and requires some form of action, and is in many peoples eyes about gloomily giving things up that we like.*

*What are you giving up this year for Lent?*

*For some it might be chocolate (probably the hardest thing I might consider), for others booze, or indeed any form of luxury that we don't need, but whilst this might have some virtue I would ask, 'to what end?' What is it that we are trying to gain from abstaining from something? With regard to things like Lent lunches, where we substitute our normal meal for soup and a roll contributing financially what it might have cost us to buy lunch, the money then being used for some charitable cause, the object is clear to see. Though even here I would ask, what does this have to do with Lent, however virtuous it might be? To be fair the idea of giving things up originated with a desire to remove worldly objects and temptations that might cloud or bar our vision of God and might deter us from pursuing a path of goodness, in the example of Christ. In this respect the Lenten observance is part fulfilled, especially if whatever we are giving up might be something that would tempt us into doing things we shouldn't. For Lent is very much about preparing ourselves to greet our Lord anew within the Holy Week and Easter celebrations, about trying to establish that closeness and relationship that He ever calls us to. However, if at the end of the season of Lent we then revert back to indulging ourselves in whatever it was we gave up, I would again ask what are we hoping to gain, for what is the point of removing an obstacle, if this is what it is, if we are then going to replace it. To be honest, apart from abstaining from things that we know to be wrong I seriously question the motives for giving anything up unless monies saved are used to help and support others, which of course is pursuing the path of goodness, albeit for a limited period of time.*

*So what should we do to fulfil this second part of the Ash Wednesday statement? Well personally, I feel we should be looking to do something extra and whilst started in Lent could be something we continue to do beyond this period. This can be anything from tasks practical in helping others, through a spectrum of possibilities spiritual and pastoral, to the academic desire to understand more. But whatever the action, the desire should be in pursuit of faithfully seeking God's way and finding the happiness He desires us to share. In light of this I think you would agree, Lent is not about gloom and abstinence for the sake of it, but a chance to grow in faith, which is something to be cheerful about.*

*May you all have a happy Lent, resulting in a joyful Easter.*

*With every blessing, Julian*