

Ash Wednesday [1 March 2017]

St Andrew's Church

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-18; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21/John 8:1-11;

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6.10.

I want it. So what?

Don't you hate it when politicians begin a statement with the words, 'Let's be clear'? You know that as soon as they say that, they are about to talk down to you.

But as it happens, those are the words I would like to start with this evening.

Let's be clear.

And in particular, let's be clear about what we are doing here tonight, and what we are probably going to be doing during the 40 days of Lent.

You see, every year at this time we are encouraged to give something up for Lent, something we enjoy. For example, I gather that the Prime Minister will be giving up salt and vinegar crisps this year, and I heard Alex Salmond say he is giving up McVities chocolate digestives.

But why? I don't mean 'why crisps and biscuits', of course. I mean, why this giving up of things we enjoy?

This year, as I wondered what to give up for Lent, I realized that I hadn't really thought through my motivation for denying myself something I enjoy. If I am honest, I'm afraid the dominant motivation was probably a desire to feel virtuous.

So I decided to dig a bit deeper and I turned for some help to the writings of one of the great spiritual writers of the 19th century, George MacDonald. This sermon is based on his thought.

It starts with what we call 'the self'.

What do I mean by that?

I don't mean complicated Freudian theories of id, ego and super-ego. I just mean that part of us that I'm sure we all recognize. It's the part that wants what it wants when it wants it. It's the part that we tell not to be selfish. It's the part that gets angry when we are humiliated or don't get our own way. It's the part that fights hard when we try to do the right thing in the face of our own discomfort.

Most importantly, it is the part of us that does not want anyone else to be the boss of it, not even God.

And it is very, very strong. I call it 'the wiry snake' because just when you think you are getting it under control in one area, there it is again, raising its head somewhere else in your life.

According to the values of our world, the greatest goal is to 'actualize' that self by seeking happiness, freedom, security, comfort, recognition and independence, hopefully with a big dollop of money thrown in.

This is the normal world in which we all live. And then suddenly, along comes Jesus telling us about a different world, God's world. It's a world where everything is turned upside-down.

Give away your money, He says. Turn the other cheek. Forgive your enemy. Do not worry. The last shall be first. Be like a child. Rulers must serve their subjects.

In our world, the greatest aim is to protect and promote the self, but in God's upside-down world, the greatest aim in dealing with the self is ... well, what?

Believe it or not, it isn't to torture the self into submission by giving up things we enjoy. You see, there is a danger in that. If we succeed we are likely to become proud of our virtue – and there that old wiry snake is again, even stronger than before.

No, as Christians our aim should be not to gain mastery over the self but to *abandon* it - abandon it to God.

I know this is starting to sound complicated but I hope you will bear with me because I think it is very important.

You see, God created the self. It was a gift to us. But we have taken it and set it up as its own god. What God intends is that we must give up that false self by sacrificing it to Jesus, so that we get it back in the state it is meant to be in – a state of loving obedience to God's will, just as Jesus' self was.

But how do we do that? How are we to abandon the self to God, rather than beating it into submission?

The main thing is to follow Jesus. To try and see things from His perspective. To keep His upside-down values before our eyes all the time. And most of all, to want Him in our lives more than we want anything else. Then, when we find the self rising up to demand its own way we will be ready to meet it.

The conversation will go something like this:

The self says, I want that shiny new thing; I want respect and admiration.

But we reply: I hear you, self. But Jesus wants something different for me. He says it is better to give some money away instead of buying the new thing. He says it is better to be humble and serve others rather than getting recognition. And so I am going to obey Him and ignore you. I'm not going to prove I'm strong and virtuous by beating you down – I'm just going to ignore you and do what Jesus says instead.

Jesus did this himself in Gethsemane. His self rose up and said, I dread this, please take away this cup from me. And then He ignored it and said, but not my will but thine be done. [Luke 22.42]. And in perfect obedience to God, he went to the cross.

It is when we do this, when we abandon the self to Jesus, that we receive back from Jesus the self that we are meant to have – not a self pleased with its own virtue, but a self that is a little more like Jesus every day in its humility.

And that brings us back to Lent and the thing we need to be clear about.

In working out what to give up for Lent, if anything, I believe the way forward is to have a good hard look at ourselves and work out where that wiry snake, the self, is refusing to obey the upside-down values of Jesus. Then, during Lent, practise abandoning the self to Jesus in that area.

It's not about giving up crisps or biscuits just because we enjoy them.

But there may well be an area of greed in your life. If so, then by all means, give up the thing you are greedy for out of obedience to our Lord's teaching that we should receive gratefully only what we need.

Perhaps there is an area of neglect in your spiritual life, in disobedience to our Lord's command to seek God first. I realized that this is my area of disobedience, because I was putting busy-ness first, so my Lent commitment won't be to fasting but to spending some quiet time each day being still and praying.

There may be a grudge in your life which you are harbouring despite our Lord's command to forgive. If so, perhaps your Lent commitment could be to pray every day forty days for the person you resent.

In this way, we can be clear about what we are doing in Lent.

But in closing, there is something else we need to be clear about, and that is what we are doing here tonight.

Tonight we are here to repent of all those areas where we have let the self rule instead of God. Ashes are a sign of grief, and tonight we will express our grief for all the times we have put the world's values before God's upside-down values by marking our foreheads with ashes.

But as we do this, let us remember that those ashes are in the shape of the cross, and so, in our grief, let us also rejoice that despite all we have done, we have forgiveness, hope and salvation, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

