

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Ash Wednesday

A few years ago I had a slightly awkward conversation with the Abbot of Ampleforth. The point at issue was whether or not we should let other people know what we are giving up for Lent. He was of the view that the Bible was very clear: we shouldn't make a public display of our piety. This seems to be very much in with line today's Gospel reading, which warns against being hypocritical, putting on a 'sad countenance' and copying those who 'disfigure their faces'. Paradoxically enough, we do invite you to have your forehead 'disfigured' with ash at this service. This tradition has ancient roots, and there is no doubt that those who originated it, and those who perpetuated it, were fully aware of those words of Jesus. The force of those words being that what we should avoid is not witness, or commitment, but the twin evils of traditional religion – hypocrisy and miserableness.

The embarrassment of my conversation with the Abbot resided in the fact that a few years previously I had come up with what I thought was a great idea for Lent, but that I had to tell people about it in order to get the support I needed to keep it. So I told my colleagues that I have given up *grumbling* for Lent. It was really quite a serious challenge. I later wrote about it and discovered that this was the bit of the book that people most often latched on to and discussed. One woman told me that she took my advice and tried to stop grumbling, but was shocked to discover that it nearly ruined her social life – there being such an expectation that our chatter and gossip will include a hearty helping of grumbles and complaints.

I still like the idea of giving up grumbling and, if you haven't thought of anything else to give up, you might try it this year. Or you could add to the list. No chocolate and no grumbling. No pudding and no grumbling. No alcohol and no grumbling. Any of these might work! The 'no grumbling' idea is good, though, because it encourages the thought that Lent should be a positive and cheerful time. Yes, we pray for God's mercy and, yes, the word 'miserere' does sound like 'misery', but the point about Christianity is that God *is* merciful; so, if we ask for mercy and forgiveness, that is exactly what we get. What's not to like? What's not to be cheerful about?

My personal transliteration of the opening part of our Gospel reading is something like this: 'when you give something up don't make a big show of how difficult it is, but put a smile on your face and enjoy the experience of liberation that comes.'

At about 9 o' clock this morning I sent out a tweet and a Facebook message: 'Social media are great, but I am giving up Twitter and Facebook for Lent.' I then deleted both APPs from my phone. It felt like a good moment; something of a relief, actually, and it made me smile.

However you intend to mark Lent this year, I hope that if you give something up it will feel like putting down a burden, that it will make your mind a bit calmer, and that it will make you and those around you a bit happier and more relaxed. Lent begins today. I hope you enjoy it, that it does you good and brings you closer to God.

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Matthew 6.1-16
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