

Ash Wednesday

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Introduction

Lent, it is good to remember, comes from the word for Spring. *Lento* we hear, and Vivaldi's stringtime music makes daffodils emerge among us. Other languages render this season before Easter with different imaginations — Irish for instance, calls Lent *carghas* deriving from the Latin word for *forty*.

In a time of pandemic, and with the world marking a year since most places went into forms of lockdown, or distancing, or caution, or mourning, it may be good to remind ourselves of the Springtime at the heart of Lent. That is true whatever hemisphere we are in: whether our seasons are moving from winter to spring; or from summer into autumn, or from dry to rainy, it is good to keep *Lento* at the heart this Lent.

Lent has six Sundays, including Palm Sunday. The readings are introduced, today — Ash Wednesday — with imperatives: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them” Matthew's Jesus warns. The remaining six Sundays of Lent bring the voice of Mark's Jesus and John's Jesus to us. Over and over in this Lent's readings, we see the private work of reckoning with self in partnership with the public work of advocating justice, even in the face of injustice.

The first Sunday of Lent is a revisiting of the Baptism and Wilderness of Jesus from Mark.

The second Sunday of Lent is from Mark again, with a choice between the episode where Jesus says “get behind me Satan” to Peter, or the Transfiguration account.

The third Sunday of Lent moves to John, with that account of Jesus' clearing of the temple.

The fourth Sunday stays with John, and the first Nicodemus passage.

The fifth Sunday of Lent has us hearing Jesus' words about *unless a grain of wheat dies* from the beginning of the Book of Glory in John.

The final Sunday in Lent — Palm Sunday — again has a choice of gospel texts: either John's or Mark's account of the grand entrance to Jerusalem.

So we can see a form of a journey through this sombre springtime. It is a time to pay attention, to be rooted in the foundation of calling, and to hold what is most important in front of us, in order to remove trinkets and temptations, to use the mind, to love — even when it demands — and to follow, even to unknown ends.

Amen, friends, Amen. If you cannot put Ashes of Palms on your forehead, it doesn't matter. Let us read, and let us follow together. In a time when the world is hunkering down to stop the spread of virus, let us find nurture in the dark earth of these texts, letting the heart be strengthened by the stories of one man at the corner of an empire who challenged empire.

Text

Matt 6:1–6,16–21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Comment

The text for Ash Wednesday's reading is a sombre one, filled with imperatives:

- **Beware**

- Do not sound a trumpet
- Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.
- Do not be like the hypocrites when you pray.
- Go into your room
- Shut the door
- Pray to your Father who is in secret.
- Do not look dismal
- Put oil on your head
- Wash your face

These are familiar words for people familiar with Lent. But familiarity can cause us to recognise, rather than read the words. This Ash Wednesday order is less a critique of self proclamation (although, to be sure, it is that too), and it is more an invitation into secrecy.

Five times the gospel of Matthew uses the word *secret* and four of those instances are in this text.

- **Matthew 6:4: so that your alms may be done in *secret*; and your Father who sees in *secret* will reward you.**
- **Matthew 6:6: But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in *secret*; and your Father who sees in *secret* will reward you.**
Secret, Secret Secret, Secret.

The word *secret* in the Greek of the gospels is — *kruptos* — meaning hidden, or concealed. *Kruptos*, as can be heard, is the origin of the word *crypt* in today's English, as well as *cryptocurrency*. *Kruptos* entered Italian, too, giving way to *grotto*, meaning a little cave, familiar perhaps to those whose religious traditions have grottos with images of the mother of God.

So Ash Wednesday, and by association Lententide, is an invitation to a certain kind of secrecy, of concealment. Like tulip bulbs beginning to move in the deep earth, the hope of life that is at the heart of Eastertide is to be held during a time of sobriety.

What will help us keep this time? A little less display, and a little more reflection. It's not easy to do — with children at home to homeschool, with worry about the rollouts of vaccines, with anxiety about infections, with concern about employment. Lent is not a time to burden the burdened. Lent is finding a way to pay attention to small springtimes that will be a nurture. It is, ultimately, finding a way to let attention to love be given attention. It might just take a moment, the length of time it takes to wait for the kettle to boil, the length of time it takes to look at the sunrise in the morning, the length of time it takes to say *yes* to the prayer that our lives will become safer as 2021 moves through. It can be a breath, that's all that's needed; one breath after the other.

Lent is less about that discipline you chose — giving up chocolate, or wine, or caffeine — and more about the time you make for giving attention to the unseen thing that holds you together. It might be reading a poem. It is less about displays of piety and more about making time to make that donation to a cause you admire. It is less about less and more about more. More attention to the dark earth that nurtures us, rather than the dramas that demean us. Conflict, we we know week on week, is exhausting. Lent is an invitation into a certain deliberate form of rest from the noise that maddens us. I love the news, I love politics, I love ideas. So I'll keep listening to the headlines, but this Lent I'll turn the radio off after the headlines. There are other conversations I need to listen to for forty days.

Happy Lenten Springtime, wherever we find ourselves in the world. Happy secrecy.

Happy focus.

Prayer

Buried bulb,
stirring a little in the earth.
Turning, too, with shoots of green
feeding in the dark.

Spring up around us
during Lenten noise and quietude,
and in us too.

So that we might be given life
by what is lifegiving beneath our feet;
so that we might give life
to secret things
nurtured in the quiet places of our desire.

Amen.

Further Reading

The Spirituality of Conflict project is shared across Irish and British individuals and organisations. The relationship between these islands is one that has thrived and improved in the last twenty years. In the first year of Brexit, and the year that marks the centenary of the partition of Ireland, the Corrymeela Community are releasing a podcast — The Corrymeela Podcast. You can subscribe by searching for *the Corrymeela Podcast* in whatever podcast app you use, or you can listen (with new episodes every Thursday) via www.corrymeela.org/podcast