

Sermon for Ash Wednesday – 2 March 2022 – Pete Poptle

May all I say and think, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock, my Redeemer. Amen.

Forty days is always a period of significance in the Bible. You can pick Noah's flood, Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah on Mount Horeb. But most relevant to Lent are those forty days fasting in the desert by Jesus where he endured his temptation by Satan. Around the 7th century AD, Lent originated as a mirroring of this fasting, forty days as preparation for Easter. Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah teaches us about the correct way of going about fasting.

Is it to bow down the head like a bullrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? As we heard, Isaiah goes on to describe how God would prefer that we tackled injustices, oppressions, hunger and homelessness. But if, nevertheless, you do still choose to fast, then Jesus tells to do so discreetly, a little secret between you and God.

And when you read on in Matthew, Jesus goes on to explain how we should employ similar constraints, similar humility, when you pray. Go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret, says Jesus. A metaphorical room, I believe; a suggestion by Jesus to shut out the stresses and problems of your life for a while whilst you talk to God and quietly put your trust in him.

My quiet talking to God took me off in an unsurprising direction. I began to talk to God about the troubles in Ukraine. I offered up to him the fate of those poor people, and that is going to occupy my thoughts until the solution is found. A Facebook entry from our Matt George, a pictorial version of Imagine by John Lennon, helped me to reflect as I listened to the lyrics. I'm sure all of you people here quite old enough to remember John Lennon. In 1971 he was well established as a peace activist.

Imagine there is neither heaven nor hell. I worry that those concepts hopefully encourage us to judge others by praising them with the promise of heaven or condemn them by the prospect of hell. God is the judge, not us.

Imagine there's no countries. What right have we as humans to lay down claim to a part of God's creation? We can only ever be good stewards of a part of this world, so why war over our tenancy of God's land?

Imagine no possessions; and so too, as we share our material wealth. I think of COVID vaccinations and where they didn't get to. No need for greed, hunger or unnecessary suffering. Thus, says Lenin, a brother of mankind, sharing all the world.

And now, Lenin says, no religion too. All religions intend to guide their believing flock to a perfect submission to the love of God; perhaps by the promise of heaven and hell, or of reincarnation, or the use of many gods, or restricting the Eucharist to only your religion followers. Yes, I do include the modern Christian Church with all of its variations in my reflections. Just as Christ includes the Jewish religion of

the first century, no one religion should ever claim complete understanding of the here and now or the form of the afterlife, if any.

So now I would guide you, I hope, towards the true nature of Christ's teaching, because Christ's teachings are universal. They span or can span all religions. They span even those who dispute the existence of God.

I am the way the truth and life. The way, that is what the early Church called Jesus's teachings. A way centred on love, understanding, compassionate, forgiving, unselfish love; but with a caution. If you forgive others their trespasses, God will also forgive you. If you do not forgive others, neither will God forgive your trespasses.

That message can apply to anyone, anywhere. Whether they follow a religion or even profess to have no faith and no belief. Think of the outpouring of care in this country as COVID raged. Think of the selflessness the Ukraine crisis has generated and pray for the people of Ukraine and those who help them. All such people do the work of God as explained by Jesus, whether they realize it or not.

Amen.