

Ash Wednesday 2023 – Reflection

To give, and to pray.

These things are, it seems, inextricably connected. Isaiah bemoans those who fast and pray, and yet – at the same time – forget the poor. Jesus talks of giving alms, and then in the next breath talks of prayer.

In Lent, giving and praying are drawn together in unison. We focus on our inner life. We focus on prayer, on penitence, on abstinence. We make time – or so we should – for greater reflection and meditation. We strive for holiness. We do things that require self-restraint and self-control, because we know that sometimes *not* doing what we want to do is a good a thing. Fasting has gone out of fashion, but it is one way of bringing our body and our desires under control. We want food, but we deny ourselves, in the prayerful hope that in so doing we learn to bring our desires more in line with God's desires.

We focus on the inner life, we pray. And we do so, not for our own sake, but for the sake of others. We work on ourselves, not so that we might 'find ourselves', or become 'the authentic me' or 'discover who I really am', but so that we might be better placed to give to others. We work on ourselves not for our own self-actualisation but for the good of those around us.

We turn to prayer then, so that we might be better able to give.

In prayer, as we bring to God the needs of others, we cannot help but begin to be changed, to find ourselves growing in compassion and mercy. And so, prayer inevitably leads to action. We pray for something and then we do whatever small things we can to make it a reality. We pray for healing for someone, and then commit to go and visit them. We pray for the people of Syria and Turkey, and then work out how much we can give to the DEC appeal. We pray for our community, and then set ourselves the task of building community where we are. In Lent, we focus on the inner life, so that we might be changed, so that we might learn to give.

So let us join Jesus in the wilderness. Let us pray. So that we might also learn to give. Amen.