

## Lent reminds us the Lord is always with us

Ash Wednesday is a day of huge significance for us as members of the Christian community. On that day we begin our journey of Lent, forty days of turning back to God, forty days of re-examining our lives through the lens of our faith, forty days of pushing the reset button on how we live in relationship with God, with one another and with ourselves.

You don't need me to remind you that this has been a very difficult year. The first Covid case in Ireland was on February 29<sup>th</sup> last, our schools closed and we entered the first nationwide 'lockdown' on March 12<sup>th</sup>. Since then we have lived at a different pace. For some it has been a traumatic time with hospitalisations and death, for more a time of inconvenience working from the end of a kitchen table, while also trying to home school, for more still a different time where a better work-life balance may have been achieved. Everyone is in my prayers as we set out on the journey through Lent.

Lent is never about adding to the difficulty of what we are all experiencing - far from it. Rather, Lent presents us with the most powerful reminder that, in the face of the turmoil and pain, the tremendous suffering of this world, the Lord is with us, by His Cross we have been healed, by His Cross we have been saved and by His Cross we have hope. The risen Lord walks with us and calls us to rediscover and share with others the grace and joy of life lived with Him.

Who among us will ever forget the stark, solitary image of Pope Francis in St Peter's Square on that wet and dark evening in Lent last year. I want to remind you of something he said that evening that may help us as we set out on our journey of Lent. In that moment of prayer Pope Francis reminded us of the words we hear in the reading from the Prophet Joel on Ash Wednesday, *'Return to me with all your heart'*. In the very circumstances of our lives with its very particular experiences of loss, isolation and fear, God is saying, 'come back to me'. This is an invitation – not a demand. It is ours to accept or reject. Going back to that rain drenched St Peter's Square, Pope Francis reminded us, that this is a time of choosing, a time of our choosing, a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. The past year has taught us an awful lot about priorities. If Lent is about getting our priorities right, about getting our life back on track, if it is about returning to God with all our heart, I ask you, what might that mean for you in real and concrete ways this Lent, what choices are you being called to?

Of course, we have trusted tools to help us make our Lenten journey back to God. Our traditional disciplines of prayer, fasting and charity are not intended to be empty, pious actions. Instead, each of these disciplines is intended to draw us closer to God and closer to a life lived out of faith.

This Lent I invite you to really think about what meaningful choices you might make around prayer, fasting and charity. Let them be choices that allow God and others into your life. Let them be choices that will deepen the hope and strength that comes from our faith alone, a hope and strength that we are called to share in solidarity with the whole world in this time of pandemic.

Forty days. Ash Wednesday is only the first day - a day when normally you would have been able to come to church to be marked with ashes in the Sign of the Cross, the sign of our salvation, the sign of our hope. While this was not possible this year, nonetheless many of you may have the chance to join in prayer with your parish or a neighbouring parish virtually. Some of you may be able to receive blessed ashes from your parish church to bring home and share. I always think of my late mother smudging our foreheads as children with ashes from the little brown envelope she carried them home from our local church in. The domestic church was very real in our lives and the domestic church is very evidently alive and active throughout this time of pandemic. I applaud the initiative, the creativity and ingenuity of

those leading prayer at home. This is something that will remain a critical part of Church as we together gently move out of the pandemic.

So let us take this moment of prayer together as a diocesan family, during that age old ritual of being blessed with ashes, as we begin our Lenten journey and so we pray:

**“Loving Jesus,  
As I place on my forehead the sign of your saving cross  
You say to me, repent and believe in the Gospel.  
Walking into Lent  
My heart is set on you.  
May my fasting fill me with hunger for you,  
May my prayer draw me deeper into your presence.  
May my acts of charity bring your love to my home and community.  
Lord of life,  
Grant that by turning back to you in these forty days  
I will re-awaken the joy of my Easter faith;  
For you raise me up from fear and despair  
And call me to hope and trust in God who is with me always.  
With you, I will rise again. Amen”.**

Our journey of Lent soon begins, let us make this journey together. Resources will be posted throughout the season on our website, Kandle.ie. I want to thank our three newly ordained deacons for contributing to this year’s weekly Lenten Scripture Sharing series that can be found on the website for use individually or perhaps this year as part of a zoom group! I especially invite you to join me in a series entitled ‘Stations of the Cross in this time of the Coronavirus Pandemic’. Each week we will be uploading a video containing three stations of the cross, led by me with the reflections read by people who have been deeply impacted by Covid. It promises to be a special time of shared prayer. I invite you to promote this in your parish along with our other Lenten initiatives so that, together, we can appropriately celebrate Lent 2021.

For now, I ask God’s blessing on all of us for these forty days as we make our way to the joy of Easter, answering the call to come back to God with all our hearts.

+Denis Nulty  
Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin