

ASH WEDNESDAY'22.

In Pip Hare's wonderful talk on Sunday about all the trials and tribulations she faced in her first Vendee Globe solo race around the world, I was fascinated by something surprising, in particular, she shared with us all. In those rare moments of having both hands free, she used to write and remind herself of some important 'rules' – and scribbled them down with a marker pen inside the boat as you would a shopping list! The first note I recall was, 'Am I safe?' and the second one was, worryingly, 'Am I going in the right direction?'

These are great Lenten questions of faith for us. The first of these is really asking one of two things: Are we happy to just coast along and pop in and out of Church when we feel the need and when we don't feel the need, say to ourselves, 'it doesn't really matter, God looks after us without having to make the trip every time...?' And another scenario might be that we can take our faith for granted in so many ways; we don't worry too much about asking the difficult questions of life; whatever befalls, God knows best and that's all we need to explore! We needn't worry about creeds or doctrines because even the theologians always disagree with one another and choose to express themselves in dense and complicated language.

So the second question or reminder in the sea of faith actually takes us to the heart of these next 40 days. However much we may complain about another long Lent, ponder three whole months on your own circumnavigating the world with no-one to (literally) hold your hand. I guess we have to be honest and realistic how we begin to ask whether we are growing in faith and, if so, what difference that is making to those nearest us and those farthest away? Post-pandemic (although is it still too soon to say that?), we perhaps should worry less about spending more time on our own or even isolating - and certainly a lot less about having to give one thing up in particular. The Lenten challenge is surely to go back to basics and

rediscover the map and the journey in particular which leads us to the horizon, which is EASTER. And most of all to be changed (and Pip said 'thrilled') by this time of exploration and the lengthening of days.

Choose a good Lent book or two, support our charity at home this year of 'Fridge Twinning', pray every day for the anguished souls of Ukraine, put heart and soul into that ancient Christian tradition of fasting from time to time, consuming less and treating creation more gently and respectfully. Every sailor understands the danger and risk of the sea and great oceans – which is how and why, ironically, they come to almost 'revere' its power and its beauty and its mystery.

Whatever our differences of temperament or character, we are all pilgrims safe in the hands of our loving, heavenly Father. We are going in the right direction when we take our sorrows and failures seriously and when we sing or say 'Kyrie Eleison'; when we then forgive those who have hurt us; and when we say openly 'we're not there yet' because there are more treasures of faith and penitence to discover and know and share. May Christ's Cross mark all our days and put away all malice or fear. As stewards of the mysteries of God, let us place our hands in his and be shaped by the potter and the clay into something sacramental, something holy and transforming for all our futures.

Dr Balthasar said this in his wonderful book on prayer:

'Anyone who is, in some degree, versed in contemplation has certainly experienced this. Each scene of the Gospel presents itself every time in a new light, and is in no danger of becoming staled, blunted or meaningless. On the contrary, the same miracle is constantly repeated, and the Gospel, alone among historical realities, rises superior to the laws of history. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."' Amen.

