

## **SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT'25**

I saw this Muslim comedian on BBC Breakfast yesterday getting quite animated about Ramadan – which, I understand, has just begun. And like many stand-up comedians', she was very serious. She was serious about the right preparation as a great lover of food, and how going without was actually something quite transformative – a real uniting of body, mind and soul. I wonder if we are the same as we approach Ash Wednesday and the Beginning of Lent?

You probably know my answer! But at our special Benefice Eucharist this Wednesday, and with that solemn reminder with the imposition of ashes – that we are not without sin or failure or deep regrets – I honestly don't hear many Christians say, 'Yes, we're really looking forward to it'.

Perhaps we are too hung up about the giving up of things and should concentrate more about feeding our minds and souls this Lent. If you can't or won't join one of our Lent groups, will you take some time out for a recommended book, coming to our mid-week services or joining our ecumenical lunches? Will you save up for our charity this year in a political climate that is saying something quite different and, I believe, alarming in so many ways about the poorest and most vulnerable in our world. You could try a carbon fast, a digital fast (or at least cutting down on the e-traffic); you could set up your own prayer corner at home to make a public space more private.

On Wednesday I want to share some other tips or advice with you from the great Archbishop, Michael Ramsey – a person who could be as serious as, at times, he could surprise us with loud bursts of laughter. He had those rare gifts of wisdom and joy, holiness and deep humanity.

Today's Gospel reading reads something like a very important religious summit meeting! All the big names are there: Moses, Elijah and Jesus. There is definitely a comic moment by Peter there of mistaken identity. And yet there is the serious reminder here of the past Leaders & prophets of God, that their voices are not forgotten. But St Luke makes it crystal clear that the voice of Jesus trumps them all whereby the divine reveals His incarnate life with and for us: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

I think this is the best way of preparing for Lent'25...our prioritising worship, fellowship, Christian service, Charity. I know I joke when I say 'Blessed are the soup makers' but I mean it!

Lent is as much a communal task as it is an individual one. And what I love about our Gospel is that feeling of being invited to the party, to the summit, to the family or benefice-wide occasion. Despite Peter's flakiness or just plain fear of this unforgettable meeting of 'giants of the faith', he says so honestly and openly: "Master, it is good for us to be here."

Lent then encourages us to be people of living hope, attending well to one another and to the God who cherishes our company and our flourishing.

I am personally guilty of this but don't want to be for ever: 'A glass half-full, kind of person'...It goes against the grain of the Gospel which encourages us to put our boots on again and enjoy climbing the mountain, enjoying the pilgrimage of faith and its every adventure, especially its glimpses of glory and God-with-us. As our post communion prayer says, as we approach a new (purple) season, the challenge is to reflect the life of Christ in word and deed to the best of our ability and with serious intent: 'that all the world may know his power to change and save.'

This faith of ours doesn't just belong to us of course or, our locality or, just our nation; it is truly international which is why Christians in Gaza and Ukraine need our prayers of solidarity; the gift of peace is not and never can be reduced to some kind of dodgy business deal; instead, the Lenten way which leads to Easter will insist on speaking truth to power as Jesus did – unveiled - for all to see, experience, and 'own'. May God bless our faithful and prayerful keeping of Lent. May our journey and exploration lead us hopefully into all truth: body, mind and soul.

AMEN.