

## ASH WEDNESDAY '26

I am a big fan of the Dean of Southwark, Mark Oakley, so much so that I went to hear him speak recently in Ipswich Minster, and he did not disappoint. Neither did he in this week's back page 'Notebook' of the Church Times in which he confesses his great love for words, especially when a language has a word for something that we don't just have the equivalent of in English. He gives the example of an Italian phrase (well suited to yesterday's Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras): '*sobremesa*', which describes that lingering at the dinner table to chat after a meal is finished. We're not very good at that are we, in this country, lingering I mean?

That's tip number one for LENT and worth pondering some more. Mark mentions seeing a famous actor playing Richard 2<sup>nd</sup> and that crushing Shakespearian line, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me." It is a line the Dean has decided he wants to take with him into Lent this year. Lent, he says, is "a snowfall in the soul: a time for us to become Christian again, and to face the truth of how much time we waste – not creatively, but behind screens, and on futile pursuits of the enviable life. The average adult Brit spends three hours, 21 minutes, on their phone each day (How he knows this, I know not!). So while the Government moves to limit social- media use by under- 16s, I wonder whether it is targeting the wrong group. As our phones get thinner and smarter, they sneer at us as we do the opposite", is Mark's view.

Tip number two comes from another word I had never heard of before, and which has been recorded only once in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “respair”. It means fresh hope, a recovery from despair. In our short- attention-spanned, hyperactive, information-saturated, wisdom starved, and aggressively cruel, playground-bullying world of “us and them”, the Dean suggests it is perhaps time to get this word back in circulation, and to work out how to translate it into reality – soon. Perhaps it is a question we can ask of any of our ‘bespoke’ Lent speakers? (This homily will be posted on our website in the usual way should we need to remind ourselves of it).

Tip number 3 comes from the late and great Brother Roger, Prior of Taizé. He liked to recall that Lent was not a time for austerity or sorrow, or a period to cultivate guilt, but rather a season to sing the joy of forgiveness – as celebrated in tonight’s Gospel. He saw Lent as 40 days to prepare to discover little spring times in our lives.

At the beginning of the Gospel of St Matthew, when John the Baptist proclaims ‘Repent!’ he means: ‘Turn to God!’ Yes, during Lent, we wish to look towards God in order to receive forgiveness. Christ has conquered evil and his constant forgiveness allows us to renew an inner life. We are invited to a conversion: not to turn towards ourselves in introspection or individual perfectionism, but to seek communion with God and also communion with others. Turning to God! How can we renew our interior life by discovering and rediscovering a personal relationship with God? In all of us there is a thirst for

the infinite. God created us with this desire for an absolute. We must let this aspiration live in us!

During these 40 days then, let us dare to linger more creatively and spend more time socially and sociably. Let us learn the truth that our happiest days are not when we have the best of everything, but when we make the best of everything – and not with a phone in our hand. Let us review our lifestyle, not to make those who do less feel guilty, but for the sake of solidarity with the deprived. Whatever demon in your life you decide to take on over the coming days, may this new season bring you some respair.

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are reminded and marked out to believe that true worship begins with humility which leads to God's mercy. This is a beautiful prayer you will know well to begin, guide and enjoy our Lenten journey together:

“God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray and to give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask.” Amen.