



**The Stratfield Mortimer Benefice
of**

**St Saviour
Mortimer West End**

**St Mary and St John
Stratfield Mortimer**

**St John the Baptist
Padworth**

St Mary's Church of England School

St John's Church of England School

Diocese of Oxford



The Parish Eucharist
for

Ash Wednesday

17th February 2021 at 7.30 p.m.

Online at zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/6931233940>

Prayer Thought: *Lent is a forty-day journey whereby we travel with Christ to Jerusalem that we may be with him in his suffering and death and also in his resurrection.*

Ash Wednesday provides the starting point of this journey, when we recall the frailty of our humanity and that we are 'dust of the earth' brought to life by God's creative and loving power. As we journey through Lent we contemplate the meaning for us of the paradox of Jesus and the message that the man who is subject to temptation, just as we are, is also the Son of God.

Palm Sunday marks the end of Lenten preparation and the beginning of Holy Week, when Christ entered Jerusalem to be greeted by jubilant voices crying out 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes!' Yet, only a few days later those same voices cried out 'Crucify him!' If our faith is not to be as weak and fickle then we need to hear the message of Ash Wednesday, 'Now - come back to me with all your hearts.' Let's keep company with Jesus this Lent 2021 and go with him 'to Jerusalem' and keep company with him eternally. God bless

The Parish Eucharist

*The present rules and guidelines about attendance, singing & speaking in churches will be followed carefully.
This Sunday only the priest and the zoom operator may be at St John's church building.*

HYMN

**Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.**

**Keep, oh keep us, Saviour dear,
Ever constant by thy side;
That with thee we may appear
At the eternal Eastertide.**

THE GATHERING AND GREETING

The greeting proclaims the presence of the Lord with us. The Penitential Rite, the Gloria and the Opening Prayer follow. The purpose of these preliminary rites is to help the people, gathered for the celebration of the Eucharist, to join with each other as a worshipping community, and to prepare to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist - the Great Thanksgiving.

Priest In the name of God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
All Amen.

 The Lord be with you
All And also with you.

PRAYERS OF PENITENCE

*We call to mind our sins to repent of them / turn from them and to ask forgiveness of God and each other.
The Invitation to Confession*

Priest My dear brothers and sisters, let us come to the Lord, who is full of compassion,
 and acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

A pause for silent reflection follows.

All **Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
 we have sinned against you and against our neighbour
 in thought, and word, and deed, through negligence, through weakness,
 through our own deliberate fault.
 We are truly sorry, and repent of all our sins.
 For the sake of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
 who died for us, forgive us all that is past;
 and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
 to the glory of your name. Amen**

THE NINE-FOLD KYRIE

**Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.**

The Absolution

 + Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.
All Amen.

THE COLLECT

Our priest invites us to pray.

Priest Let us pray.

Together we spend a few moments in reverent silence realising that we are in the presence of God our Father to whom we make our prayers. The priest 'collects' our prayerful thoughts into theme of this Christmas Day celebration in the Opening Prayer, which is either sung or said.

Priest Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness, may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

All Amen.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Liturgy of the Word consists of readings from the scriptures; a sermon/homily, which expounds the readings; the Profession of Faith, which is the Creed of God's people; and the Prayer of the Faithful or General Intercessions in which the people of God intercede for all humankind. In the Liturgy of the Word God speaks to us of redemption and salvation and nourishes us with his word. We are not only listening to past history. The God who speaks to Israel and to the early Church speaks to us today through the power of the Holy Spirit working within us as we listen to him and as he reveals the pattern of his plan for our lives. 'The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double edged sword but more finely...it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts'(The Letter to the Hebrews 4:12).

THE FIRST READING – 2 Corinthians 5: 20 - 6: 2. Read by Peter Tanner

Reader A reading from The Second Letter of St Paul to The Corinthians.

We are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God. As his fellow workers, we beg you once again not to neglect the grace of God that you have received. For he says: *At the favourable time, I have listened to you; on the day of salvation I came to your help.* Well, now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation.

At the end of the reading:

Reader This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.

Now we hear the Gospel (the Good News) and acknowledge that we are his people and called to be part of his mission to the world inasmuch as we share his message and his life with faith, hope and love.

THE GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

All Praise to you O Christ, King of eternal glory!

Harden not your hearts today,
but listen to the voice of the Lord.

All Praise to you, O Christ, King of eternal glory!

THE GOSPEL READING - MATTHEW 6: 1 - 6, 16 - 18.

The Lord be with you.

All And also with you .

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

All Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be careful not to parade your good deeds before men to attract their notice; by doing this you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you; this is what the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win men's admiration. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right is doing; your almsgiving must be secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

'And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them; I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

'When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do: they pull long faces to let men know they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know you are fasting except your Father who sees all that is done in secret; and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'

At the end of the Gospel

All This is the Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

THE SERMON

We are a Eucharistic community in word and sacrament. Through the readings God has spoken to his people of his redeeming and healing love and of the nourishment which his Spirit gives. Our priest now reflects with us on the readings of the day relating them to our Eucharistic celebration and to our ordinary life.

After the sermon there is a short period of silent reflection.

THE BLESSING AND GIVING OF ASHES

The ashes of the Palm Crosses are blessed.

Dear friends in Christ, let us ask our Father to bless these ashes
which we will use as the mark of our repentance.

After praying silently for a short time, the priest continues

Lord, bless the sinner who asks for your forgiveness
and bless + all those who receive these ashes.

May they keep this Lenten season in preparation for the joy of Easter.

All **Amen.**

He sprinkles the ashes with water in silence and then places ashes on those who come forward, saying to each:

Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

The Creed is not said.

THE PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL OR GENERAL INTERCESSION

We are invited to pray for the needs of the Church and all people. Through baptism we have been made one with Christ, our great high priest, and we share in his intercessions before the Father for the needs of his Church and of all people. Our intercessions flow from our listening to the Gospel and sermon by which we have been made more aware of our Christian commitment.

This Prayer of the Faithful or General Intercession is announced and consists of a series of intercessions; we pray for the universal Church and its mission and for our bishop and for our benefice - our parishes, our two Church schools; for the world, for our Queen and country, for our local communities and families; for the sick and all in pain, for all who are working on the front line at this time of Covid 19; and for the departed. And in communion with Blessed Mary, St John the Evangelist, St John the Baptist and all the Saints of God we entrust one another and all people to God's saving love.

Priest With confidence and trust let us pray to the Father for the Church and for the world and let us
thank God for his goodness.

The deacon or leader continues.

For the one holy catholic and apostolic Church; for Justin our Archbishop; for Steven our bishop; for Olivia
our area bishop; for our benefice, our Church schools of St Mary's and St John's.

let us pray to the Father.

Lord of compassion,

in your mercy hear us.

For the mission of the Church, that in faithful witness it may preach the gospel to the ends of the earth,

let us pray to the Father.

Lord of compassion,

in your mercy hear us.

For Elizabeth our Queen, our Government, our District and Village Councils and all in authority that they may
direct us in the ways of justice and peace.

let us pray to the Father.

Lord of compassion,

in your mercy hear us.

For those preparing for baptism and confirmation and for their teachers and sponsors,

let us pray to the Father.

Lord of compassion,

in your mercy hear us.

For peace in the world that a spirit of respect and reconciliation may grow among nations and peoples,

let us pray to the Father.

Lord of compassion,

in your mercy hear us.

For the poor, the persecuted, the sick, and all who suffer, for refugees, prisoners, and all in danger;
that they may be relieved and protected... ,

let us pray to the Father.
Lord of compassion,
in your mercy hear us.

For those whom we have injured or offended,
let us pray to the Father.
Lord of compassion,
in your mercy hear us.

For grace to amend our lives and to further the reign of God,
let us pray to the Father.
Lord of compassion,
in your mercy hear us.

For those who have died recently...,
let us pray to the Father.
Lord of compassion,
in your mercy hear us.

In communion with all those who have walked in the way of holiness, Mary, John the Evangelist, John the Baptist and all the saints,
let us pray to the Father.
Lord of compassion,
in your mercy hear us.

Priest God our Father, in your love and goodness you have taught us to come close to you in prayer,
fasting and generosity; accept our Lenten discipline, and when we fall by our weakness, raise us up
by your unfailing mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen.

THE LITURGY OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

At the Last Supper Christ 'took some bread and when he had given thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying "This is my body which will be given for you; do this in remembrance of me". He did the same with the cup...' (Luke 22:19-20). The Church, joyfully obedient to the Lord's command, celebrates the Eucharist taking care that our 'liturgy' corresponds carefully to the words and actions of Christ: 1) Taking bread and wine in The Preparation of the Gifts we take our gifts to the Altar. Gifts or money for the poor and the Church's ministry to the poor are also presented. 2) Giving thanks (the meaning of the word Eucharist) in the Eucharistic Prayer the priest, in the name of us all, says the great hymn of our thanksgiving to God for the whole work of salvation, in which the offerings become the Body and Blood of Christ. 3) The breaking of the one bread is a sign of the unity of the faithful. 4) And in the giving of Holy Communion we receive the Body and Blood of Christ as the Apostles did from his hands. In this way Sunday by Sunday and day by day the Church carries out in loving obedience to his command what the Lord asked his disciples to do in remembrance of him.

THE PEACE

We acknowledge and give thanks for our unity with one another in Jesus Christ our Lord, which his death and resurrection have brought to us. He is the peace between us. The sign of peace echoes Christ's own resurrection greeting to his disciples. Before we share in the same bread we express our love for one another and pray for peace and unity cf Luke 1.78,79.

Priest Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has given us access to his grace. *Romans 5.1,2*

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

All And also with you.

THE PREPARATION OF THE ALTAR

*The peoples' gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar.
The offerings of money is made and promised to support the ministry and work of the Church.
Taking the Gifts: The priest gives thanks to God for the gifts in the following words.*

Priest **BREAD**
Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

All Blessed be God for ever.

WINE

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become for us the cup of salvation.

All **Blessed be God for ever.**

OUR TIME, TALENTS AND TREASURE/MONEY

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have the gifts of our time, talents and money to offer. May our offerings of our gifts be a sincere sign of our gratitude and our dedication to your service.

All **Blessed be God for ever.**

The priest prays quietly: Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble, contrite and thankful hearts. The priest washes hands as an expression of the desire for inward purification, praying quietly: Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.

PRAYER OVER THE GIFTS

We are all invited to draw near in prayer:

Priest Pray my brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.

All **May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his Church.**

Priest Amen.

Gracious God of wisdom, may the light of your eternal Word, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, lead us in holiness and guide us to glory; we ask this in his name.

All **Amen.**

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

The Eucharistic Prayer is the centre and high point of the whole Christian celebration. This great prayer of praise and thanksgiving proclaims the wonderful works of God and through it we join ourselves with Christ in praise and thanksgiving to God the Father and in offering ourselves to him in union with Christ's self-offering on the cross. We express our share in the prayer, which is said by the priest on behalf of all the people, by listening inwardly and joining in the acclamations (joyful shouts or songs) and the Sanctus (the Holy, Holy, Holy which concludes the preface), the memorial acclamation and the great 'Amen' which concludes our Eucharistic Prayer.

Priest The Lord be with you.

All **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

All **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All **It is right to give thanks and praise.**

The Preface praises God for his mighty acts:

And now we give you thanks because you give us the spirit of discipline, that we may triumph over evil and grow in grace, as we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed.

Therefore in our joy we sing to your glory with all the choirs of angels:

The Acclamation

All **Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

We pray to the Father for the sending down of the Holy Spirit and recall the Lord's Supper.

Priest We thank you, loving Father, because when we turned away you sent to us your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. He gave his life for us upon the cross. He shows us the way to live. Send your Holy Spirit that these gifts of bread and wine may be for us Christ's body and his blood. On the night before he died, when darkness had fallen, Jesus took bread. He gave thanks, broke it, and shared it with his disciples, saying:

‘This is my body, given for you. Do this to remember me.’

After they had eaten he took the cup of wine, gave thanks, and shared it with his disciples, saying:

‘This is my blood, poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this to remember me.’

So, Father, with this bread and this cup we celebrate his love, his death, his risen life.

As you feed us with these gifts, send your Holy Spirit upon us and change us more and more to be like Jesus our Saviour.

Help us, Father, to love one another, as we look forward to that day when suffering is ended and all creation is gathered in your loving arms.

And now with Mary, the Blessed Mother of our Lord, St John the Evangelist, St John the Baptist, and all your saints, we give you glory, through Jesus Christ and in the strength of your Holy Spirit, today and for ever.

All Amen.

HOLY COMMUNION

The communion rite of the Church lays strong emphasis on peace, unity and our prayer for forgiveness. We come together to the Lord's table in accordance with the Lord's command, 'Take, eat... take, drink', as a community bound together by love. We are confident in Christ's mercy as we respond to his call to come to his table. Our communal recitation of the Lord's Prayer - the prayer he taught us - prepares us for Holy Communion with our Lord.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Priest Let us pray with confidence to the Father in the words our Saviour gave us:

All **Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

The priest takes the host and breaks it over the cup, praying quietly:

May this mingling of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.

'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Christ's gesture of breaking bread with his disciples at the Last Supper gave the entire Eucharist the name of the 'breaking of bread'. This gesture signifies that we who share one bread and one cup are made one. Through the breaking of the host the Eucharist is seen more clearly as a sign of unity and charity since the one bread is being distributed among the members of one family of God.

Priest We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

All **Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.**

The priest prepares quietly for Holy Communion. We may all join quietly in this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit your death brought life to the world. By your holy body and blood free me from all my sins and from every evil. Keep me faithful to your teaching, and never let me be parted from you.

PREPARATION FOR HOLY COMMUNION

Priest Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. *cf. John 1: 29*

Blessed are those who are called to his supper.

All **Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.**

The sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds since then the sign of the eucharistic meal appears more clearly. However, we live in exceptional times when, for the time being, communion can only be given in one kind for those who can come to church. Whilst others join faithfully online. Please God, may we all soon be able to come together again to receive Holy Communion under both kinds at the Lord's table. The priest takes the host, raises it a little and shows it saying: The Body of Christ. And the same with the cup saying: The Blood of Christ.

When receiving Holy Communion the response and assent to Christ is:

+ Amen.

*The vessels are cleansed and put away. You may wish to join with the priest who prays quietly:
Lord, may these gifts give me purity of heart. May they bring me healing and strength, now and ever. Amen*

After Holy Communion we may keep a further period of silence.

PRAYER AFTER HOLY COMMUNION

Priest Let us pray

The priest invites us all to pray that the Holy Eucharist will have its effect in transforming our lives and bring us to God's kingdom. All pray together silently for a while before the Post Communion prayer.

Priest God Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us
both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life:
give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive these his inestimable gifts,
and also daily endeavour to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen.**

THE NOTICES FOR THE COMMUNITY ARE GIVEN.

THE CONCLUDING RITE

Priest The Lord be with you.

All **and also with you.**

THE BLESSING

Priest Christ give you grace to grow in holiness,
to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him;
+ and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

All **Amen.**

All Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All **Thanks be to God.**

HYMN

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode;
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou mayst smile at all thy foes.

See, the streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst t' assuage?
Grace which, like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

ON NOT GIVING UP: THOUGHTS FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

By Philip Endean SJ



If your thoughts as you prepare to begin Lent are of what you plan to give up and of how much you will suffer without chocolate or alcohol during the next six weeks, perhaps it is time to realign your approach to the season. Will your chosen Lenten observance help you to grow as you journey towards Easter? Philip Endean SJ reminds us that ‘this great season of grace’ is not a time for constriction: ‘Lent is only Christian if it is positive.’

Before I was ordained, I worked for a year in a primary school in Mexico City. On Ash Wednesday morning, I arrived on the site at 7.30 am, as usual. Three things became quickly clear. No one had engaged a priest for the day and the foreign seminarian was going to have to step in.

Thus, through a distorting microphone in the school yard, I found myself improvising a catechetical dialogue: imagine Joyce Grenfell in bad Mexican Spanish. ‘Now, children. I’m going to make the sign of the cross on all your foreheads. We use a cross because someone died on it. Does anyone know who died on the cross?’ It was a deliberately easy question, expecting the answer ‘Jesus’. In fact, eight hundred children answered back with impressive volume and unanimity ‘Dios’ – God. I was taken aback by the theological robustness here, but I pressed on with my lesson plan regardless. ‘And what did Dios do after he died?’ Silence. Pedagogical failure. All I could do was tell them the ‘right answer’ piously, and hurry on to the real ritual business.

‘God died’: end of story. Behind those children’s response lay an inheritance of long suffering and oppression, something to be revered, not patronised. Nevertheless, there is also cause for concern here. The Acts of the Apostles tells us of disciples who had never heard of the Holy Spirit (19:1-2); here we have Christians with no knowledge of Easter. If anything like this explains why Mass on Ash Wednesday, despite the lack of ‘obligation’, is generally one of the most crowded celebrations in any church’s year, then the situation is quite worrying.

Faith that Jesus is of one being with the Father who made heaven and earth, cannot rest simply on the fact that he lived nobly, for a worthy cause, and died as a result. That much is true of lots of other people too – from Socrates in antiquity to the firemen who gave their lives on the morning of 9/11. Our big stories about Jesus being one with God depend on the fact that he rose from the dead, and was seen by the very disciples who had failed him. We proclaim his death precisely because it was not the end. He also rose, and he will come again. Lent is the preparation for Easter: the celebration of new life, not of God’s death.

Lent thus cannot be a time for wallowing in the negative. The English word ‘Lent’ comes from the same root as ‘length’. Lent, the time of spring’s first stirrings, is a time for our being lengthened. We are to grow into the full stature of Christ, to move nearer the kingdom prepared for us before the world’s foundation. It may be very noble, and may meet some psychological need within ourselves, to think about Lent as our trying hard, as our effort. But when we think that way, the focus is probably on ourselves. What Lent is really about is opening ourselves to someone else, about stretching ourselves, so that we can receive the gift of new life coming from God alone.

Many churches in these days will sing the hymn that begins:

*Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.*

Think of Jesus, hungry and tempted, and the next step seems just obvious:

*Should not we Thy sorrow share
And from worldly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
Strong with Thee to suffer pain?*

Well, maybe. But by the time we get to this stage in that hymn, I normally feel pretty uneasy. Those well-crafted lines make the whole business sound so heroic, so stiff upper lip, what the British Empire was built on. If we resist our temptations to chocolate or alcohol, we somehow gain merit, and rise above mere sensuality. But this way of thinking does not have much to do with the gospel. When Matthew and Luke in their different ways name the temptations Jesus faces, it seems as though Jesus himself is growing into, being stretched towards, the full reality of his mission. He has to recognise that his way is not that of simple miracle-working, despite the triumphs with which his career in the gospel seems to open. He has to realise that his kingdom is a kingdom in the truest sense, a kingdom given from above, and therefore not of this world (John 18: 36-37). Jesus is not proving his moral fibre, but growing in his sense of his own identity.

This piece could almost be called 'On Not Giving Up For Lent'. Almost, but not quite. What is important is that we avoid superstitious practices that are at best mere window-dressing, and at worst thoroughly destructive, reflecting the styles of religion from which Jesus came to free us. The real point is about the mind-set we bring to Lent. I am trying to insist that Lent is 'this great season of grace', God's gift to the Church – to use the words of the Order of Service when it was still in native English. Lent places us before the author and pioneer of our faith, Jesus Christ, and asks us how we might follow him more deeply. Lent is only Christian if it is positive.

In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius Loyola in various ways encourages us to pray, not out of our conventional selves, or with the skills we have already developed, but rather from the parts of ourselves that are being 'shaken up by different spirits' (Exx 6). We need to be in touch with what can transform us, what makes us confront new questions, what stretches our commitment and identity. It is that kind of focus that should characterise Lent. Where am I growing? Where are there questions in my life? Where am I being called to something deeper – something which, precisely as such, I cannot get my head round? What is my equivalent of the desert, of Jesus's temptations? How can I enter into that place fully, freely, generously?

Now, such questions may well still give us the normal answers. Lay off the sugar or the cigarettes or the meat – not because the enjoyment I get from such things is bad in itself, but because the pleasure they give may be dulling my awareness of the tough issues that really matter. And though no-one can live at full spiritual stretch all the time, it is good for us to have a designated six weeks every year when we try more intensively to open ourselves to God's stretching. We should not be too ambitious; if we are, we'll almost certainly fail, get discouraged, and give up some time round the first Sunday. We need realistic targets: enough to stretch us, not so much as to crush us. We need to go slowly, to seek sustainable growth.

When such considerations inform our indulgence in standard Lenten penance, well and good. But we can also be creative, and develop practices that are less conventionally 'penitential'. Some of us might need to give up some element of our religion. Some of us may need to sleep more. Some of us, particularly if we are given to the single or celibate life, may need to work more deeply at our relationships, and stop avoiding the all too challenging ways in which they alone can stretch us.

Lent is for lengthening, not for constriction. As we begin the forty days, we need to ask the Spirit where we are being called, here and now, to grow. We need to ask ourselves what we must do in order to further that divine purpose. We need to stop confining ourselves, and instead be open to the one who calls light out of darkness, brings life out of death. It is not really about our effort, still less about our looking miserable. Rather, with humble pride, we boast that all we can do is to plant and to water. The real growth, the true lengthening, comes from God (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

Philip Endean SJ