

So, here we are.

The pancakes have been eaten, the larders have been emptied. Epiphany is over. Lent is upon us. Lenten sacrifices or commitments have been contemplated and made. The season for hope and joy is over. The season of woe and repentance is here.

Now, before you get too bummed out, let's be clear: it could be a whole lot worse. The "Carnival" of Mardi Gras and Shrove Tuesday that some of us celebrated yesterday used to mark a much sharper turn in public life. The word Carnival originally meant "a farewell to meat" in Latin because Lent entailed going without meat entirely for the whole season. (Perhaps not so huge a sacrifice today, with all our delicious vegetarian options, but a much different prospect a few hundred years ago when palette options were decidedly less diverse). Not only that, but in the more religiously centered societies of centuries gone by, Lenten privations were enforced far more strictly.

Compared to all that, voluntarily going without a few choice creature comforts for a month or so really doesn't seem that bad.

With all this talk of going without and acknowledging how much rougher it all was back then, it's easy to fall into that trap of seeing Lent as some sort of divinely mandated exercise in masochism. In the Irish sitcom *Father Ted*, the titular priest's housekeeper announces that she's off on a Lenten pilgrimage trip. When Ted reflexively wishes her a happy trip, she screws up her face and announces: "Oh, no, Father, I want a good, hard suffer."

Is God really looking for us to spend forty days in abject misery in penance for our sins? As if giving up sweets or pizza for a few weeks would even bring us close to balancing our ledger with God (a ledger that the Bible tells us has already been paid in full through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ).

There is certainly a spiritual component to fasting and repentance. There is a rich history of spiritual ascetism going back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early Church. But even these titans of faith warned against the temptations of pride that excessive privation often invites.

Our Gospel today is a similar warning along those veins. The treasure in heaven Jesus speaks of is not some earthly prize to be won. It is the reward of spiritual discipline, of knowing our limits and seeking discipline not for any worldly recognition but for the glory of God and for advancing the work of the kingdom.

It's hard to claim that the people who assembled our lectionary didn't have a sense of humor when we have today's reading from Matthew. Someone must have had at least a partial smile on their face when they assigned the words "do not be dismal and do not disfigure your face to show others you are fasting" to an Ash Wednesday service!

And our practice here on Ash Wednesday is indeed strange. As we all ask ourselves at different points in our Church journey, what's the point of it all?

In the Left Behind book series—which I read fervently as a child but certainly do not recommend—Christians are quite literally marked with the cross. Any true believer receives a miraculous cross on their forehead, enabling them to tell friend from foe. Today on Ash Wednesday the marks on your heads serve some of this purpose (though you 7:00'ers have missed the boat on that a bit), helping us recognize our fellow Christians (or at least the ones who attended Ash Wednesday service) out and about in the world.

But of course that isn't why we mark ourselves with ashes. If that were the case then we really would be slipping into the boastful practices Jesus warns about in our Gospel, leading ourselves into the temptation of categorizing and sorting who is "in" and who is "out." It is helpful to spot our fellow Christians out in the world, but we have plenty of other ways of doing that.

No, our ashes are not a sign for other people. They are a sign for us. A reminder, of our sin, a reminder of our mortality, and a reminder that we are saved through the grace of God.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

We mark this moment, this shift from the joy and wonder of Christmas and Epiphany to the melancholy reflection of Lent, not in some flailing attempt to please God with expressions of our own misery but as a reminder that our faith is not just one big party.

The joy of Christmas, the wonder of Epiphany, the bountiful celebration at Cana – these are all great moments in the life of Jesus, a life that tells us that joy and celebration are indeed sacred.

But Jesus also withdrew for prayer and reflection. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, upon being told that John the Baptist had been killed in prison, his first reaction was to withdraw to a secluded place, probably to grieve his cousin's murder—and perhaps to reflect, too, on his own impending passion. The

life of Jesus was not all nativity scenes and joyful celebrations. Much of it was wrapped in sorrow, grief, and privation.

And our own faith cannot only be joyful tidings and soft feelings. The baby in the manger will end up nailed to a cross. And though we hold to our joy in the resurrection even during Lent, we cannot skip past the hunger in the wilderness, the grief and fear in Gethsemane, or the agony of the passion. To pretend that this is all optional, an inconvenient season of dreariness between Hallmark card holidays, does a great injustice to the rich lives of faith we all experience through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is brokenness in all of us, a brokenness in our world and our lives, that drives us back to the foot of the cross again and again in search of forgiveness and redemption. To pretend this is not so is to join in the culture of the world around us, a culture that wants to deny both sin and death.

The mark of ashes we receive today is a mark of that brokenness, an acknowledgement of our sins and the reality of our own death. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Memento mori.

We remind ourselves of our own brokenness and mortality not out of morbidity or some perverse need to wallow in misery, but to remind ourselves of our own need for salvation and to deepen our experience of that salvation. Discomfort is a blessed thing, because it is in our discomfort and embrace of the inconvenient truth that we are mortal human beings and not gods that we become better prepared to encounter the true God in Christ in our own lives and in the lives of others.

The ministry of Jesus was rarely to the comfortable or content. Jesus comes to us in our brokenness and our guilt and offers us forgiveness and love. Our disciplines—whatever those may be and however they are reflected in our lives—are performed for a purpose. Not to win earthly accolades or to wallow in misery, but to take us out of the snares and preoccupations of the world and hone our minds to better see the work we are called to do in the world, towards the coming of the kingdom.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. But remember too that you are saved through the power of God. Lent is temporary, like all seasons of our lives. Our lives upon this earth are temporary. But the loving power of God is eternal. Lent is only a part of the journey, and it is through the gray clouds of Lent and the Passion that the light of Easter shines all the clearer.