

Meditation for Ash Wednesday

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

On Palm Sunday last year, we raised fresh, green palm crosses aloft and cried out with the crowds lining the track from Bethphage to Jerusalem; *Hosanna!* Save Us!

Today, we bring these palm crosses back. They're dried out and more grey than green. Have our hopes dried up too? We actually burn our palm crosses today. Does that mean we're declaring our hope dead – the hope we shared with those crowds who thought He would change everything that day? *Hosanna!* Save us! What from?

I have an idea that burning our palm crosses is in fact a symbol of our solidarity with the one who gave his life for us – that we are prepared to join him in the hopeless despair of Gethsemane if that's what's needed.

As we look forward through Lent to Good Friday, it's perfectly clear what we're crying for salvation from. The ashes speak of our own death. Yet Good Friday will speak of the one in whose death is our salvation. So maybe there's another way of seeing what our actions today might mean – burning the palm crosses, being marked with the ash, being reminded that we are dust.

We know that in six weeks time, we'll hold fresh palm crosses aloft and cry out again to be saved. The challenge to us is to be transformed people by the time we do that – or at least, to be people willing and active in the transforming work God wants to do in us. The language we use in the Church is to say we die to our old self in order that God might call forth the new life in us. How do we die to that old self which separates us from God, from our neighbour, from our true selves?

Lent is the season where this question is our focus. We enter the journey of Lent today. What lies before us is a journey

beset with obstacles we need to overcome like temptation to self-centredness, and full of challenges we must meet like renunciation and repentance. What does this mean?

Temptation does not mean enticement in Scripture. There, the one who tempts most often, is God, and God certainly does not entice us. When God tempts, what is happening is testing, testing the faith and obedience of God's people.

Renunciation does not mean giving up chocolate or coffee. The word renounce is used at our baptism and it is used in the context of repentance – turning from godlessness to God – choosing God.

Do you renounce Satan, evil, sinful desires?"

Renunciation is our exercise of will *for* God. It's a positive choice.

So it follows that repentance does not just mean feeling sorry for the mistakes of everyday life. Rather it's an exercise of our will to serve God – setting out again on the journey in the direction we chose when we first answered Christ's call; embarking again on the Way of Jesus.

How does that work itself out in everyday life? That's what we seek on the journey of Lent. But a hint comes from today's Gospel – the first words about giving alms.

Almsgiving was the prime act of piety in Judaism – *true religion is this; to care for the widow and the orphan.* James 1.27

So Lent isn't a time for giving up, but rather giving *for* – giving for life, giving for love, giving for God. *The one who hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord.*

Jesus went first on this Lenten journey. He is the one who goes before us; the one we follow. We know where his journey took him, and today, as we remember that we are dust, we

commit ourselves anew to accompany him, even on that road.

Mercifully, we know that because of him, death is not the end of this journey. Rather it is an end which he transformed into new life for any who would follow him to his gracious Kingdom of faith, hope and love. Amen