

## Journeying through Lent with a willing Spirit

How is your Lent going? Have you given anything up for this season and are you finding it difficult, experiencing cravings for chocolate or a glass of wine?!



Giving up luxuries for Lent as a form of penance has been a long tradition that still carries on today. More recently, people have chosen to give up an action of theirs considered to be a vice, or do something that helps them feel closer to God, and often give the time or money spent doing that to charitable purposes or organisations. A survey in the United States last year showed that 17% of people gave up something for Lent and the most popular things were chocolate, social media, swearing and alcohol. Giving up things like these that may be such an integral part of life can be hard work and require an immense amount of self will and very patient family and friends willing to put up with a degree of tetchiness!!

To help our journey through Lent, the psalm set for Ash Wednesday could be very helpful - a prayer for us to journey with a willing spirit closer into the presence of God:

*'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.'* (Psalm 51:10-12)

Lent is sometimes seen as a time of retiring into a wilderness, as Jesus retired to the desert before starting his ministry, a time of hardship and restraint. This could become a joyless time when we spend our time in morbid self-examination but this would be to take us to an unhelpful place where we are unable to receive the gifts that Lent has to offer. Lent presents us with time for reflection, for a revitalising of the joy to be found in simply knowing God and for a rekindling of willingness to serve him.

I recently read these words, written by Anthony Bloom, a monk and bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church:

*'Contrary to what many may think or feel, a period of spiritual endeavour (during Lent, perhaps, or while taking part in a retreat) is a time of joy because it is a time for coming home, a period when we can come back to life. It should be a time when we shake off all that is worn and dead in us in order to become able to live, and to live with all the vastness, all the depth and all the intensity to which we are called.'*

This turns Lent into a very different kind of time to the perception of it as a gloomy time that we have to get through before we can celebrate Easter. It becomes a period of joy that prepares us for even greater joy in the new life of Easter.

I hope that, as you journey through Lent, you find it a time of renewal. Just as nature is preparing to resume growth after the winter, may it be a time when you grow in your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Living God. May it be a time when you are strengthened with the joy of our Lord and a willingness of spirit to be committed to sharing his message with those around you.