**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Here’s a question. How many of you will be coming to our Ash Wednesday service this week? Wednesday, at 8pm, here in church. (There will be no midweek Eucharist because I want to encourage as many people as possible to come in the evening)

We are standing now on the brink of Lent; the preparation, in my opinion, for the most important Christian festival there is. Not to denigrate Christmas, of course, but Sunday by Sunday we celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who went willingly to a brutal death on the cross for the sins of every one of us. As a demonstration of love, nothing else could come close.

So Lent is a time for us to go into the metaphorical wilderness and ponder the sins of humanity; humans’ inhumanity to humankind – and to take time, and steps, to right some of the wrong that is in each of us. To become the people that God made us to be.

I would encourage everyone to come on Wednesday evening – to consider as a community what it means to be loved that much and to begin the journey towards a truly joyful Eastertide.

So, for Wednesday and beyond, what will you do to mark Lent?

It always used to be about giving something up – cheese or chocolate or wine or whatever … an excuse to start that diet yet again maybe. Or I know people who have a Facebook fast. But in recent years I have encouraged people instead to take something on – a spiritual practice of daily prayer or an act of random kindness. However, I am now leaning back towards the giving-up thing.

And this is why I think I have reconsidered:

There are a number of reasons, but here’s one: it’s easier to stop having a glass of wine than to stop being a flawed person. Trying to be good may be a worthy aim, but it’s often really hard to get a handle on. Lenten discipline is not meant to be the transformation of ourselves from bad to good in 40 days - that is not something that we, as humans, can possibly achieve - but rather it's meant to be a way of reminding ourselves of our need to be transformed, and of our hope that God is doing so, a little bit at a time.

Even secular culture has some intuitive appreciation for renouncing things and for moderating our consumption, as ‘Veganuary’ reminded us. Fasting and abstinence are not just religious pursuits; across all manner of traditions and cultures, they hold up a mirror to our habits and supposed needs.

So the purpose of a Lenten discipline is not necessarily to make us more holy or ‘spiritual’, whatever that word means. As many of us who have tried it know, when you’ve been without coffee for a couple of weeks, you can be positively scary and deeply unholy to your nearest and dearest. The harsh reality of our having physical human bodies will insert itself into our good intentions and make its own point; which is that lack of caffeine to those of us who are in some measure addicted to it is not going to make you a better person. But it is going to hold up a mirror to our habits and behaviours and force us to see ourselves afresh.

And that brings us back to where we were last week, with Jesus talking about not worrying and being more like the lilies of the fields: what are we going to do about living in these beautiful, powerful, yet fragile and imperfect bodies. The question is always one of this embodied existence.

And so we come back round to the gospel reading this morning: at the heart of this transfiguration story is the changing of physical appearance apparent in Jesus to those who are looking on, and their response as onlookers. Note that Elijah and Moses are referenced: they both had physical manifestations of their encounter with God too – indeed Moses’ face subsequently shone so brightly that he had to keep it covered when he went back among the people, so as not to dazzle them. I picture to myself that sort of glow that some people have when they are first in love – but multiplied a thousand-fold. Likewise, lots of people, both in the Bible and outside it, appear different after a personal encounter with God.

So how does all this relate to our observance of Lent then? My reconsideration of why it might be important to give something up is because that physical renouncing of something brings into focus our dependence on ‘things’, whatever those things might be.

It gives us a little window in which to step back and say: so where has this come from? What is this dependence on this thing that I have? What is this thing that I am somehow deeply attached to? Because if I am that deeply attached to it, then it is taking a part in shaping who I am as a person.

And then I can start to reflect more carefully on who I am.

And I can also reflect on how my life is dependent on others, and also who else is dependent on this thing that I might potentially give up for six weeks: who made the wine, the cheese, the chocolate? And what about the welfare of the cow? Or taken a step further: its effect on climate change even?

By that route, we can see how we are all part of humanity and creation – the dependence and interdependence that it entails. And by that means, I actually step into this journey of becoming more godly, more Christlike.

Back to the story of the transfiguration now: we’ve heard those words before – this is my son, my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased. They go all the way back to the baptism of Jesus as told earlier in Matthew’s gospel. And actually, that is what Lent is about: it is about living more deeply into our own baptism as God’s beloved children. The journey that begins with baptism leads us towards the cross, the death and the resurrection. And all these givings-up are things that help us, through awareness of our physical being, to become who we were always intended by God to be.

So to sum up: the question Jesus asks, and that Lent will ask, is about the formation of our selves through our physical bodies, but is also more generally about embodied existence in the world, in community and in nature.

It is not a small thing, but we start with small things: you will not change the world this Lent, but you may begin to change yourself, or at least find a space in your embodied life where it is possible to hear God’s invitation to change.

Take something on by all means – come to the Lent course every Wednesday evening from the Wednesday after next – it’s the service in church this Wednesday.

But also give something up; something that will make you stop and think about your dependence on others and on the world and its gifts.

May we and the whole creation find ourselves on this journey, waiting not in despair, but in hope. This transfiguration is our transfiguration.

**Amen**