

This time last year I was standing in church with a little pot of squidgy black ash, daubing it on each of you and saying: ‘Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return’. That remembering has come closer to us over the year than we could have believed possible – and to thousands of others who have never heard the words at all. It is an annual ritual to remind ourselves of where real salvation is found: ‘be faithful to Christ’, and in preparation for the observance of a holy Lent: ‘turn away from sin’. We are invited to this observance by ‘self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s word’.

It’s easy to focus on one part of this. In the days when we could get together you would hear people who had very little to do with church most of the time saying to each other: ‘What are you giving up for Lent?’ or virtuously refusing the glass of wine, piece of chocolate or slice of cake with ‘Oh no, thank you, I’ve given it up for Lent’. But ‘whenever you fast’, says our gospel reading, ‘do not look dismal, like the hypocrites...they have received their reward.’ For many people, Lent is about self-denial, and self-denial means giving something up; the minimal hardship of denying yourself the pleasure of something you enjoy. But this year, through no will of our own, we have done a lot of giving-up. Giving up having a meal out, meeting friends in the pub, going to the office, taking the children to school, going somewhere on holiday. And the much harder things: giving up meeting the family for a weekend or for Christmas, having the wedding you wanted, knowing that you have a secure job and can pay the bills, being able to visit someone you love in a care home for months on end but knowing they are suffering from your absence, giving up the last visit to someone you love to say goodbye, and giving up attending their funeral. Any of this would be hard, and we’ve been forced into so much of it.

Father David may disagree with me - and if he does I’m sure he will tick me off afterwards – but I think we have given up enough already. It is unreasonable, this Lent, to give up anything else. As it also says in the gospel: ‘When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.’ Not quite literally, perhaps, but in other words, make yourself look and feel as good as possible. I firmly recommend that we should deliberately take more care of ourselves, so that the self-examination, prayer, reading and meditation that we shall also do becomes a positive experience, not a burden. To make that work in these uncertain times, there are two things we should tackle.

The first is unrealistic expectations. Nobody knows when we’ll be able to go to the cinema, or on holiday, or to get together for a birthday party. Our prime minister recently said that the way forward should be slow and careful – utterly sensible – so that there never has to be another lockdown. But he has no way of knowing or realistically promising that! To subvert a Beatitude: ‘Blessed are those who expect little, for they shall not be disappointed.’ Hope is essential, but hope which is fenced around with dates and times and promises leads to repeated disappointment, which knocks us back again and again. Give up the expectations, and when something does work out it will be a happy surprise. We will get past all this, and it will be in God’s good time, notwithstanding all the attempts by politicians and interviewers to deliver certainty.

The second thing to deal with whenever we spot it is negative thinking. Concentrate on what can be done, what is possible, what is going well, even if it seems very small. Put oil on your head and wash your face. You’re on your fifth Zoom call of the day – which means that there are people to talk to who want your input. The kids are running you ragged – and you can sit

down every day for a meal together. My entire face-to-face social life consists of a two-minute chat with the checkout lady in Sainsbury's on a Friday, and I can go there under my own steam, choose what I want, and get a Danish pastry to go with my coffee when I get home. One helpful tip might be to avoid too many news bulletins. They are guaranteed not to contribute to an optimistic frame of mind.

Here's my prescription. Find something that makes you feel good, and do it. Find a book to read – it doesn't have to be a solid and serious one – take it slowly and enjoy it. Come to Compline or the contemplative prayer group and pray with other people. Carve out a little time to think through each day, spot something that has gone well and thank God for it. Build yourself up, and then use the extra energy each day to do something, however small, for someone else. Isaiah (in our first reading) has some good suggestions; they just need a bit of creative reinterpretation for 2021. Take his word for it: 'The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.' So, speaking as an ancient ruin, may you work with God to create a constructive, positive and cheerful Lent.