

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 18 February 2026, Ash Wednesday

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are
penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Holy God,
our lives are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son
bring us healing and make us whole
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12 ; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

The Silent Bargain

There is a curious feature of the Christian life that we rarely name out loud. It is this: that much of what we are asked to do, much of what Jesus commends to us, feels like a kind of investment made without any guarantee of return. A silent bargain.

Our gospel reading on this, the first day of Lent, makes this especially clear. Jesus names three practices — alms giving, prayer, and fasting — and each one asks something of us. Each one costs.

Alms giving: an investment in our relationship with others. The cost is money, yes, but also compassion, attention, and the willingness to be interrupted.

Prayer: an investment in our relationship with God. The cost is time, silence, and the courage to be vulnerable and seen.

Fasting: an investment in our relationship with ourselves. The cost is hunger, restraint, and the refusal to be ruled by appetite.

These are not decorative extras. They are not spiritual hobbies. They are the inner architecture of discipleship. And Jesus insists that they are to be done in secret — quietly, without display, without applause. They are, in his words, “seen by your Father who is in secret.”

Which means that Lent is not a season of performance. It is a season of trust.

Because if we are honest, these investments do not come with a guaranteed yield. We cannot calculate the spiritual interest rate. We cannot predict the timeline of growth.

We cannot point to a chart and say, “Here is the measurable return on my prayer life this quarter.”

The life of faith simply does not work like that.

And yet — we make these investments. We choose the hidden path. We take on the disciplines Jesus names. Why?

Some might be tempted to answer with something like Pascal’s Wager — the idea that belief is a kind of spiritual insurance policy: better to believe and be wrong than not believe and be wrong. But Pascal’s Wager, for all its cleverness, is ultimately defensive. It imagines faith as a hedge against eternal loss.

The gospel offers something far more compelling.

We make these investments not because we fear divine punishment, but because God has already invested everything in us.

This is the deep theological truth at the heart of Lent. Before we give anything, God gives everything.

In creation, God invests breath, beauty, and freedom.

In the covenant, God invests promise, patience, and steadfast love.

In Christ, God invests nothing less than God’s own life — entering our flesh, bearing our sin, descending into our death.

In the Spirit, God invests presence, guidance, and the quiet work of transformation.

The whole economy of salvation is tilted toward generosity.

God risks everything.

God withholds nothing.

God makes the first move, the costly move, the decisive move.

And so, our Lenten disciplines are not attempts to earn God’s favour. They are responses to a grace that has already been poured out. They are ways of aligning our lives with the truth that God has already chosen us, already loved us, already sought us out.

A few weeks ago, I read a story about a primary school teacher who, every morning before the children arrived, would place a handwritten note on one child’s desk. Just one. A sentence or two. Nothing dramatic. “I noticed how kind you were yesterday.” “You’re growing in confidence.” “You helped someone without being asked.” She did this quietly, without telling colleagues, without posting it online, without seeking recognition.

She said she started doing it because she realised how many children come to school carrying burdens they cannot name. And she wanted each child, at least once in the year, to discover that someone had seen something good in them — something they might not have seen in themselves.

Most of the children never mentioned the notes. They simply tucked them into pockets or bags. But one day, at the end of the year, a parent came to see her. Their child had kept every single note, folded neatly, in a little box under the bed. “These,” the parent said, “have changed the way my child sees themselves.”

A year of quiet investment.

A year of hidden faithfulness.

A year of silent bargains — with no guarantee of return.

And yet the return came.

This is the shape of the Christian life.

This is the shape of Lent.

We do the hidden work not because it is efficient, but because it is faithful. Not because it guarantees results, but because it aligns us with the God who sees in secret.

Which brings us to the ashes.

Ash Wednesday is the one day in the year when the Church asks us to face, without distraction, the truth of our condition: that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. That our lives are finite. That our hearts are divided. That our relationships — with others, with God, with ourselves — are interrupted by sin.

But the ashes are not merely a symbol of our frailty. They are also a sign of God’s investment in us.

They are placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross — the sign of the One who has borne our sin, carried our griefs, and opened the way to life. The ashes tell the truth about us, but the cross tells the truth about God. And the two truths must always be held together.

The spiritual risk of Ash Wednesday is that we might hold only one of them.

That we might cling to the ashes and forget the cross.

That we might remember our sin but forget God’s mercy.

That we might wear the mark of penitence but not the freedom of forgiveness.

But the gospel will not let us do that.

The ashes are not meant to be worn as a badge of shame. They are meant to be washed off — literally or figuratively — as a sign that repentance leads somewhere. That confession opens a door. That God’s investment in us is not theoretical but real, and that forgiveness is not an idea but a gift.

So tonight, as we begin this season of Lent, we are invited into the silent bargain — not because we are uncertain of God, but because God is certain of us.

We give alms because God has given us to one another.

We pray because God has already spoken our names.

We fast because God desires our freedom, not our captivity.

And we receive the ashes because God’s mercy is deeper than our dust.

Lent is not a transaction.

It is a response.

A response to the God who has invested everything — creation, covenant, cross, Spirit — in the hope that we might return to Him with all our heart.

Amen.



S⊕ JAMES WOODSIDE
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