

By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

The Downs and Valley Churches, Lent 2026

2. Ash Wednesday 2026 – ‘You hate nothing that you have made’ -

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.

(The Collect for Ash Wednesday)

Last week I let down a good friend very badly. He was due to speak at an afternoon event in Leamington, and as he's only recently moved to the area I had offered him a lift. But it was a busy morning, which began with a difficult visit to my dad in a Home in Chipping Campden, then a complicated funeral and burial, followed by a race to pick my friend up on time. I just made it and we set off, and I was very pleased with myself that we arrived with 10 minutes to spare. I dropped him off and went to find somewhere to park. But just as I did so he phoned: 'I can't find the room we're meeting in anywhere', he said. I suddenly realised that I had taken him to the wrong church. So I jumped back in the car and we raced off to the right church – which was about 10 minutes' drive away, very angry with myself. By the time we arrived it was past the start time, and a whole room of people was waiting. There wasn't time to get the projector he wanted for his presentation working, and I felt terrible. I had messed up.

Of course I apologised. Several times. And again by email the next day. His response was very gracious. 'Really no need for apology' he said. 'I was glad of the lift because I don't know Leamington. It was a conversation instead of a presentation, which all worked out fine in the end.'

Well of course that's what old friends do when you let them down. He is as aware of what's happening in the bigger picture of my life at the moment as almost anyone, and though I felt bad, as I should have done, that I had let him down, his response was generous, gracious and understanding. Without using the word specifically, he forgave me.

But what should I do with that forgiveness? It would be easy to let the shadow of my messing up affect our relationship. I might keep trying to make amends. (That would probably be rather irritating to him!) I might reduce or cut off contact with him, because he now knows what a mess I can make of things and that's rather embarrassing for me.

Or I can accept the forgiveness. And accept that I've done nothing to earn it – quite the opposite – and can do nothing to put right my mistake or atone for it. And also accept that he knows me

as I am and that I can't hide my real self or pretend to be better than I actually am. To do this is actually to strengthen our friendship rather than weaken it.

The important thing is for me to focus on my friend's forgiveness, not on my letting him down.

Well, you will have seen the point of this little personal drama already. Ash Wednesday is the day when we begin Lent, which, in the words of the Church of England's introduction to the season, has the 'characteristic notes' of 'self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter'.¹ But while there does need to be some reflection on ourselves, the greater focus surely needs to be on the grace of God.

I have a hunch that Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the prayer which forms our Collect for Ash Wednesday in 1552, would have agreed with me. If you look at his prayer, you'll see that there are 12 lines, and of them only two focus on us: the rest focus on God.

This was a new prayer when Cranmer wrote it, but, like many of his prayers, it sprang from a phrase he was familiar with from the services in Latin which had formed the basis of worship until his time. In this case it was the prayer of blessing over the ashes at the beginning of Lent, which began with that wonderful phrase, 'you hate nothing that you have made.' Pause for a moment and take it in. God hates nothing that he has made. If he made it, he loves it. If he made you, he loves you.

And so, in the next phrase, the collect goes on, 'and [you] forgive the sins of all those who are penitent.' God does not hate what he has made, so he yearns to forgive sins. Human beings, made in the image of God, are always called to come back to him, and the door is always open. The image echoes the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), of course. But to fully experience the love of God we must turn towards him, as sunflowers turn towards the sun. It is this turning that we call penitence. Without apology, sorrow at what we have done, even guilt and the recognition that we have messed up, forgiveness has no meaning. Timothy Radcliffe has a lovely way of explaining what is going on in this process of penitence. 'One icy January evening,' he writes,

I bicycled across London...Stupidly I had forgotten to put on gloves. When I arrived, my hands were so numb that I was unable to feel anything. I had to use my elbow to ring the doorbell. My hands only began to hurt when I came into the warmth of the house and blood returned to my fingers. Similarly sorrow is a sign that we are touched by God's forgiving warmth. We feel pain because we are unfreezing. This sorrow is often called 'contrition'. The word comes from *tritura*, the rubbing of things together, as in the threshing of grain, breaking the outer inedible husk. So contrition is the threshing of our hearts, softening them, breaking down the hard husks of our hearts, making them hearts of flesh, able to feel sorrow and joy.²

Accepting the forgiveness which God is always ready to give us can be painful. That is what Cranmer's collect recognises in its next line: 'create and make in us new and contrite hearts'. The 'threshing of our hearts' is what God does in us, as we turn to him and accept his love and his forgiveness. To do so means giving up the false images of ourselves which we often cling to so seriously. The truth is that we are only small fish in a great pond. I sometimes, rather pompously and seriously, pride myself in being effective and efficient (don't laugh). In fact I am rarely either of those things, as days like the one I had last week show from time to time. Yet that

¹ *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* (Church House Publishing 2006) p.211.

² Timothy Radcliffe *Why go to Church: the drama of the Eucharist* (Continuum 2008) p.19.

is all right, because I have learned over many years to accept who I actually am, and find that my friends still love me through it. Learning not to take ourselves so seriously stems from accepting the love and forgiveness of God, and recognizing that he knows us better than we know ourselves. Herbert McCabe writes that 'When God forgives our sins, he is not changing his mind about us. He is changing *our* minds about him. He does not change; his mind is never anything but loving: he *is* love.'³ The collect speaks of creating and making, and this is not just repetition for effect, I think. It helpfully draws a distinction between original creation and continuing making, rather as the two stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 do. God *has* created us in his image, but God also *continues* to make us, shape and form us – and this is a lifetime's work and beyond. Our task is to submit to the maker's hand.

'[W]orthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness' is part of that submission to the process of making and re-making. 'Worthily' here means, I think appropriately – neither too much or too little. Lament over sins might mean apology, saying (and meaning) that we are sorry, but not dwelling on it too long: too much lamenting takes the spotlight from God and leaves it on ourselves if we are not careful.

'[A]cknowledging our wretchedness' is what we do on Ash Wednesday when we receive the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads. We are dust – no more, no less – and yet, in Robert Hughes' evocative phrase, 'beloved dust'.⁴ The gift of confession, as we begin Lent, and as we begin our Communion service throughout the year, is that we 'may receive from...the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Receiving is key, says Herbert McCabe again:

Forgiveness is what matters most of all; to be forgiven, to be contrite...is the most tremendous thing that could happen to you in your life – so of course it is very easy. You do not have to work at being forgiven: you only have to accept it, to believe in the forgiveness of God in Christ, in his eternal unconditional love for you.⁵

Allowing this insight to work within us afresh will change us and re-make us, whatever stage in life we have reached.

Lent is a good time to do this. You might take a simple phrase like 'beloved dust' and spend a few moments before the mirror each morning saying to yourself that, though you are dust, you are *beloved* dust in Christ. Or you might pray this collect each day in Lent, slowly and carefully, savouring each phrase, examining how it emphasises God's part in forgiveness rather than ours, and claiming that for your own.

They say that if you do something for six weeks it forms a new habit, and it is perhaps therefore no accident that Lent lasts for six weeks. Using these simple or more complex prayers through Lent may help us to form new habits both of mind and heart, so that we learn to know, more deeply than ever, that God truly hates nothing that he has made.

Some years ago I knew a musician who hosted the French composer Olivier Messiaen for a weekend's visit to conduct an orchestra. If you search for pictures of Messiaen you will find that in old age he was a rather crumpled figure, who usually wore enormous knitted scarves on top of a rather shabby overcoat. He was also a very devout Roman Catholic. After the first night's

³ Quoted in Radcliffe, p.18.

⁴ Robert Hughes *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (Continuum 2008), see especially p.109: 'Jesus is God's ultimate declaration that the dust we are is beloved.'

⁵ Herbert McCabe *God Matters* (Mowbray 2000) p.245.

rehearsals suddenly announced to my friend that he must go to Mass early the next morning. My friend duly found a church they got there just in time for him to drop Messaien off, agreeing to pick him up half an hour later on the way into the morning's rehearsal. I'll never forget his description of Messiaen as he came down the steps of the church after Mass. 'He looked like he'd been ironed,' he said. That's not a bad way to look at Lent, I think.