

## Ash Wed 2018 – Matthew 16:24 ‘Denial’

‘If anyone would come after me they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.’ These words of Jesus are some of the most famous but also most disliked words of Scripture. I say disliked not because they’re not true, but because they *are* true. Be honest, I imagine most of us hear these words and get a little feeling of nausea every time. It was obviously true for Jesus, and we know it’s true for tens of millions of Christians in dozens of countries around the world. But is it for *every* Christian? And if so, what would that mean for us?

As I reflected on that again this week, I found myself thinking about the **word ‘denial’**. It struck me that the word denial has 3 different meanings nowadays. First there’s denial in the sense of a rebuttal of an accusation. Someone is confronted with a charge and they have to accept or deny it. Think of the famous denials of history by saints as well as sinners – it’s not just rogues and liars, it’s most people at some point, even St. Peter: ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know him!’

Then there’s denial in the sense of a refusal to believe despite strong evidence to the contrary. Someone whose loved one is facing a terminal illness but still refuses to accept the painful truth is said to be in denial. A company which is going under but which is still desperately trying to pretend business is booming is in denial. And hypothetically speaking, a US President or indeed a tabloid newspaper, who, when presented with overwhelming evidence from 900 of the world’s leading scientific experts that global warming is created by human lifestyles with potentially catastrophic results, pretends that it isn’t and that all will be well without any changes to our behaviour, could also be said to be in denial. But that last one never happens, of course.

So the word denial gets a bad press – we tend to associate it with liars and fantasists. Which doesn’t help us when it comes to the third meaning, the one we’re interested in today: and that is denial as a choice to forego certain pleasures or even rights for the sake of a greater purpose. We deny ourselves in order to *receive* certain benefits, often those not immediately obvious, or ones that cannot be enjoyed without the disciplines of denial.

**That sense of denial for the purpose of spiritual growth lies at the heart of Lent.** As the prophet Joel says in our OT reading: ‘Rend your heart and not your garments.’ The hair shirt is no use if it’s just because someone told you to, or if you just wallow in self-pity for 40 days. What God desires is our hearts, and this kind of self-denial is a way of saying ‘God, you are still, and always will be, the most important thing in my life, and nothing should ever get in the way of that.’ In other words denial is really another form of two other ‘d’ words we like a lot better – devotion and delight.

In fact I would suggest that we should try and see Lent less a season of wallowing in the dust and **more as a season of focused discipleship**. I really like the introduction we use at the evening ashing service, and I’ve adapted it for our ashing ritual in a few moments. It describes Lent as a time of ‘renewal and growth’. The word Lent comes from the old Saxon word for spring, and those are spring words aren’t they? Denial as renewal and growth, devotion and delight.

A good Lent means that what we take away from ourselves we replenish in other ways. We don’t just give up, we add in. More study, more prayer, more time to delight in Jesus. Perhaps also more generosity, so others are replenished too.

**But just as denial has 3 meanings, so we can apply the word 'denial' to Lent in exactly the same 3 ways.** Firstly we can refuse to believe it has a point at all. When presented with Lent, we simply deny it. It is here that I must confess that I come from a tradition which doesn't really *do* Lent. Why would we, if theologically, every Sunday is Easter Sunday? Why give ourselves to special disciplines for 6 weeks of the year if it just gives us a get-out of real discipleship the other 46 weeks of the year?

That would have been my argument 15 years ago, and it's worth admitting that there is some merit in this argument. Lent-abuse has turned whole church traditions off the idea of it as an exercise in nominalism and false piety. God dislikes it as much as any other form of self-deception, and Jesus was pretty hard on it too – he says as much in our gospel reading.

But crucially Jesus doesn't reject the idea of self-denial, only the abuse of it. For all that people abuse spiritual disciplines, he still says 'when you give', 'when you fast'. A season dedicated to this in a focused way can be a great blessing if the purpose is renewal and growth, if Jesus is at the heart of it. And let's not forget that this can be at any time of year. Lent has value because lots of people do it together, but don't feel constrained by that. Lent practices work just as well in July and September and January too – *if*, and only if, God calls you to do that.

Similarly, the second definition of denial is simply to believe that we're alright as we are. Our spiritual lives are ticking along just fine, why get all hair shirt and po-faced about it? That's another form of self-deception, isn't it? Lent may need varying degrees of approach and intensity each year, but the thought that any of us are 'the finished article' should trouble us. There's always more to learn, new ways to grow. As I've said before, stay hungry, people, stay hungry. We can never exhaust the riches of either God's love or his wisdom. If you think Lent can't teach you anything, you're probably in more spiritual trouble than you realise!

Which brings us back to the third definition – denial for the purpose of spiritual growth. This year we've consciously looked at this idea of balance, on giving proper focus *both* to taking things away *and* adding things in. That's why we're encouraging everyone to fast one lunchtime per week (leaflets on table) *and also* to work through the 40 stories of hope Lent book, both as individuals and groups – take something away, add something in. Death and resurrection, just as any journey towards Easter should prioritise.

*Lent is about renewal and growth, devotion and delight. Done well, it resets our compass back to true north, it restores our humility and our joy, it increases our gratitude at all the good things we enjoy – and of course, it focuses our minds and hearts on the very ground of our being, God himself in the form of Jesus.*

In some senses what we do at Lent is what we can and maybe should do all the time. These are, after all, the things of first importance. But we're human, and a good Lent gets us back into good habits, in the hope that maybe, just maybe, some of them stick, and whatever happens from this point, we continue to walk more closely in love with our master and friend, Jesus Christ.

As I close, let me quote that famous prayer of St Richard of Chichester which we could do worse than to use this Lent – and may we pray it today as our hearts desire for the next 40 days:

**Dear Lord, of you three things I pray: to know you more clearly; to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.**