

## Ash Wednesday 2021: Reflection – ‘REND YOUR HEART’ (Joel 2, Matthew 6)

### INTRO TO OUR LENT SERIES

Our next song will be new to most of us, but it leads perfectly into our series for this Lent. As a team of churches, for the next 6 weeks we’re exploring the theme of ‘Worship in the Wilderness’ through daily devotions, midweek groups and Sunday worship.

We felt this is particularly apt in this current season, encouraging us to find God in the midst of the challenges we face, which for many of us feel like a wilderness time. The story of the bible shows us that God has a habit of meeting people most powerfully in the wilderness, and our hope and prayer is that God will do the same for us too. So let’s sing: ‘You lead us through the wilderness.’

### TALK

This is an odd week when it comes to preparing worship. On Sunday just gone, we’ve had Valentine’s Day – and 3 days later it’s Ash Wednesday. That’s quite a journey to get your head around. In fact, I’m writing this talk just before Valentine’s Day, trying to look ahead to a very different type of service!

However, there’s more in common between the two than you might think. The thing that unites both is **the centrality of the heart**. The heart is central to both, but in rather different ways. If Sunday was all about little red hearts everywhere, today God asks us to do something entirely different with our hearts. ‘Rend your heart,’ the prophet Joel says – which is rather less cute and fluffy than all those romantic images of just a few days before.

But let’s go a little deeper, and Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday are not as different as we might suppose. Both call us to love with all our hearts. We might express that differently, but ultimately both call us to examine our hearts, and to give our hearts to the object of our love. The big bonus of Ash Wednesday being that ash is a lot cheaper than flowers and chocolates!

The spiritual life is all about the heart. Which is good news for us this year, especially, as the one thing I’ve heard from people coming up to Lent is this: ‘we’ve given so much already this year, please don’t ask us to give anything more up!’ This whole year has been a fast of many things we hold most dear.

And that’s where we need this message this year. At its root, **Lent is all about the heart. It’s about rediscovering our love for Jesus**, and re-setting our lives around him, about giving our hearts back to God, that he might continue to transform us, from the inside out.

Get the heart right, Jesus insists, and the actions will follow. That was the problem for the Pharisees in the gospel reading. They were doing lots of righteous acts, but not for God – they were for others, for show. That’s why Jesus calls them actors – that’s the literal meaning of the word hypocrites – it was *all show*, they were not attending to their hearts.

**But God sees the heart.** So Jesus says, do your stuff for God secretly, do it from the heart, do it for the Audience of One – and that One, our loving God, will reward you.

In the same way, Joel calls us to examine our hearts, to let them be broken with love for God. A lot of hearts get broken on Valentine's Day – you might have sent cards that never got acknowledged. I remember getting a card as a teenager that was supposed to be from the school heartthrob but was just a joke from my friends. Teenage boys, eh?

But having a broken heart can be a good thing if it's directed towards God – God loves to mend broken hearts that surrender to him. And the language is very striking isn't it? Joel adapts the image of a funeral, which perhaps for us in this season is particularly poignant and powerful. It was customary for people in that culture to show grief by ripping their clothes.

But, again, God says, don't worry about the externals: worry about your hearts. It's your *hearts* I want, not the show.

As we begin Lent this year, most of us can't offer God a 'show' even if we'd like to. Churches are shut, we're mostly at home. What better opportunity, then, to use this Lent as a chance to offer God our whole hearts again? No-one is going to see anyway! Some of you may choose to give something else up, but for many of us, let's see this as *a chance to add things in*: maybe prayer, or study, or some form of extra devotion each day. Maybe generosity, maybe encouragement to others. What is your heart telling you? How can you offer your heart productively this season?

The word Lent comes from the old Saxon word for 'spring'. As our ashing ritual just now affirmed, a good Lent is about renewal and growth. We learn to give all of our hearts to the one we worship above all: our glorious, beautiful, loving God.

*So as we worship in the wilderness this year, may God grant us grace to rend our hearts, to offer our devotion secretly to the Audience of One – and to be drawn ever deeper into the abiding presence, the loving goodness, of Jesus. Amen.*