I wonder what we expect from Ash Wednesday? It is a day which is familiar to most of us – though it is observed in many different ways.

For some, Ash Wednesday, as the start of lent marks the day they will give up something – the start of 40 days of fasting or abstaining from something which otherwise might give us pleasure. Though for some this fasting may also be a chance to break a bad habit. When I gave up smoking 13 years ago, I did it during Lent. The pressure of promising God, not just myself, that I was going to give it up worked for me on this occasion.

Ash Wednesday can also be a day of frailty or even fragility – when we are mark with an ash cross and reminded of our mortality – life comes and life goes… this image and theme is often difficult for many – and yet for others is a word of assurance.

I am currently reading a novel set in the East End of London in the 1960 – 1980s. A time of immense change globally, but especially that part of London. It has been a challenging novel to read as it follows the story of 3 very poor women who seem to have started with nothing, and then lose even have that small amount taken away. What the story is doing well however is questioning what it is we expect from life and from God, and what we do with the ongoing uncertainty of life.

There has been much written and spoken about the collective trauma which our societies have experienced in recent years with the pandemic and how it has underlined the uncertain times we live in. But I struggle with this rhetoric, because I find it hard to think of a period of time in my life, in which I have not lived in communities that have had a level of uncertainty. And the reality is, that most the global south, and indeed much our global community life with uncertainty on a daily basis. What has changed through the pandemic is the acknowledgement of this uncertainty – as well as a the fact that some how often had wealth or power to control uncertainty had that take away. In recent years uncertainty has been a common, even unifying experience for many communities.

The prophet Joel, whose words we hear read on Ash Wednesday speaks into this uncertainty. Indeed, Joel speaks into the concept of uncertainty and what we do with it, and what it says about our expectation of God. It is only recently that scholars have come to any agreement about the timing of Joel’s writing, but given the uncertainty it speaks into it is believed to be written in the Persian period around 400 BCE. Joel is different from many of his contemporaries – or even the other prophets because he speaks into uncertainty. Many of the other prophets make sense of challenging and uncertain times by making them a divine retribution for failing to be God’s people. Bad things or times are seen as punishment – but Joel offers us another narrative[[1]](#footnote-1).

Theologian Megan Strollo highlights in her study of Joel that instead of focusing of why things are difficult, or why bad things are happening like most other prophets – Joel asks the question ‘so what?’ Joel invites us to ask *What do we do when our community faces threats? To whom do we “turn”?* She highlights a point we often miss in the biblical text. In verse 12 and 13, Joel records that God calls the people to turn back. But there is no use of the word sin in this text – they are not turning back from doing wrong – rather *God and Joel call the people to turn to God in supplication, and to stand together in lament.* [[2]](#footnote-2)

Yes we return to God who knows our pain and suffering – but we turn in trust – to stand together. It is not that Joel doesn’t think our changed behaviour cannot influence God – in fact – like the other prophets he is clear our behaviour matters. For Joel we are still called to fast and to gather in lament – but this comes in spite of our uncertainty. We are called back to the heart of faith where we dwell together in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Joel gives us a possible way, a vision if you like, of how we might come with expectation to both Ash Wednesday and Lent. A life amidst the uncertainty – that doesn’t seek to explain or control – but rather is a space to gather, to lament, to turn, and to be with God.

I suspect this is also at the heart of the passage we hear from Matthew – beware of piety – or public exhibitions of repentance or charity. Rather come into the quiet place, come and turn to be with God.

There is much in our liturgy today about repentance and forgiveness, but at the heart of each our actions today is the love of God – and the vision of a God who calls us to be with, rather than above, or against. God calls us into community – into a space where we lament the tragedies of our age, and yearn for God to be with us in the midst of it all.

Lent, and even Ash Wednesday, as I have said many times before, is meant to be a dreary time – or a time of constant regret or grief – rather it is a time for us and to take time to re-centre our discipleship. A time to focus on the vision of Jesus in a way that might sustain and nurture our faith. Our Lenten discipline give us an opportunity to grow; but also to lament – something we are often shy of doing in the church. If you take time to look at the Lent resources you will notice that traditionally Lent is a time of preparation for Baptism – but also for us to prepare to re-affirm our own vows at the Easter Vigil. While it is a time for penance and reconciliation – a time to restore relationships and our sense of peace in the church and in all our relationships – the purpose of such reconciliation is hopefully it is a time of refreshment. Lent is a time when we fast to focus and prepare for the mystery of Holy week and Easter – and it is a time when we focus our charity – how we share what we have in the midst of our faith. But as Joel and Matthew remind us, it is also a time to turn to God and inhabit the space of prayer together where we lament that all that has been created is not realised.

Lent can be a gift, if we allow it to be. As we prepare for the Easter Vigil, to shed those things which distract us from our service of God, and to empty ourselves of those things which create barriers to our faithfulness to Christ. To do this, we share together in acts of prayer, fasting and service.

Our Lenten commitment is a conversation and relationship we have with God alone. Jesus was aware that our human nature leads us to places that can distract us from the very purpose of this faith. He was equally aware for the need to lament the pain of this world, and our desire for it to be different.

Lent is a journey for good reason – the process of emptying ourselves – of considering contradictions – or giving time to reflect on the changes we have endured. Today we are invited through the act of marking our foreheads to make space for this journey in the days ahead – whatever they may hold.

As we begin this period of Lent, as we receive our ash cross and are reminded of our humanity – may we turn to *God in supplication, and to stand together in lament* – and in doing so may we find comfort, reconciliation and hope in our uncertainty. Amen

1. [Commentary on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-joel-21-2-12-17-14) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Commentary on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-joel-21-2-12-17-14) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)