

## Appetites and urges – and what to do about them

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2025

*Readings* [2 Corinthians 5.20b -6.10](#) [Matthew 6.1–6, 16–21](#)

These early weeks of Mr Trump's presidency have reminded me once or twice of certain moments in cinema.

Friday's Oval Office meeting with Mr Zelenskyy was like a scene from *The Godfather* (events since then have rather confirmed that impression) and then there are the turnabouts of some people, like the Vice President and the new British ambassador in Washington, who were sharp critics of the President in the past but have now found ways to be complimentary and supportive. These put me in mind of an older movie, *A Man for All Seasons*.

The stage-play-turned-film tells the story of Thomas More, Henry VIII's Chancellor, who loses his job, his freedom and then his life for being unsupportive of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn. His friend the Duke of Norfolk cannot understand why Thomas alone is standing out against the King's Great Matter when all the nobility like him have fallen into line.

'You're behaving like a fool,' he says. 'We're supposed to be the arrogant ones, the proud, splenetic ones...and we've all given in!'

'I will not give in,' says More, 'because I oppose it, *I* do – not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but *I* do – *I*!'

The stage directions say that More now

'goes up to [Norfolk] and feels him up and down like an animal'

(I guess the way you might inspect a horse you were thinking of buying) and then he says,

'Is there no single sinew in the midst of *this* that serves no *appetite* of Norfolk's but *is*, just, Norfolk?'

There is! Give *that* some exercise, my lord!'

It's a good question: is there anything in here that is not my appetites – my instincts to find pleasure and avoid pain – but is just me?

We have evolved from creatures who live by appetite and instinct, and we do too. But is that all there is to us? Am I just a jumble of demands battling with each other? It's not that appetites are all bad; it's rather a question of whether they tell the whole story about me.

Some say they do. Some say that human consciousness, this sense that there is a 'me' that is not just the sum of all the molecules and sinews and synapses inside me, is a fiction (though a useful one). Well, today, I'm assuming that there is a 'me' in here. It certainly feels that there is, even after all my appetites and urges have been accounted for.

Sometimes, to be truly 'me', to be myself, I simply need to follow an urge.

Sometimes I can only be myself by going against it. If you have ever needed – really needed – to give up smoking, or control your temper, or get to safety despite your fear of heights, you will know what I mean.

This brings us to a part of Christian faith that has got us a bad press, and made it look like the faith of Jesus is anti-life, or at least anti-fun. Think of the saying of Jesus in the sermon on the mount, 'If your right hand offends you, cut it off' ([Matthew 5.30](#)).

The hand is the usual instrument of your urges: it's what you use to grab food or drink or money, or another person. Any of these urges may be good – if you are poor, or very hungry, or need to defend yourself – but they may sometimes be bad, they may 'offend' your true self; and, because there is more to you than just instinct, you can cut yourself off from them and still be you; indeed, cutting yourself off from them may make you *more* yourself, more the person God created you to be.

This is what the tradition of fasting (in tonight's reading, also from the sermon on the mount) is about. It is not, as Jesus says, to make a show of your religiousness: it's a secret, between you and God; and in that secret place God can show you who you truly are.

You can have a fast from anything; from chocolate, from alcohol, from TV, from social media. You can have a fast from a habit you pursue unthinkingly, or from a habit you think about a lot, the kind of thing which makes you say 'Today, whatever else I do, I must have x, or, do y'. Some you might be better off without for ever – if you make a habit of stealing stuff, *do* give it up for Lent, *don't* take it up again at Easter – but other things you shouldn't give up for ever, because in themselves they are OK.

Fasting is a type of giving – giving up – and there are two other types of giving mentioned in the gospel reading and traditionally associated with Lent: giving time to God, especially in prayer; and giving away, to others. How might we do those?

*Giving time to God* Can you give an hour each Tuesday for an [online Lent event](#) – hosted next week by our own Bishop Sarah? Each week we shall contemplate a moment in Jesus' life and what it can show us about how to live

fruitfully in a world that the appetites of our human species are overheating and harming.

*Giving away* Can you support our [Lent Appeal](#)? We are raising money to buy vital equipment for the labour ward in Murgwanza Anglican Hospital in Kagera, Tanzania, with whom we have close links.

A old Latin prayer that Thomas More (as a good Catholic) would have known, asks God to help us go navigate life's *bona temporalia*, 'the good things of time', without spoiling our chances of enjoying the wonderful things of eternity. These earthly, timebound things are good; it is our appetites for them – I must have this, I need that – which can get in the way of heaven.

So, once in a while, let's put them in their place: that's what Jesus does when he goes away into the wilderness; that's what we are invited to do when in heart in mind we join Jesus in the wilderness through the season of Lent.

And Lent starts now. 'Now is the acceptable time,' says St Paul this evening. Lent is a time to learn that good things are not there just to be grabbed, consumed; a time to find yourself, your own true self buried among all those urges and appetites, and give it some exercise; a time to shut our ears to the voices screaming from hoarding, magazine and screen, urging us to turn our wants into needs; a time to listen to the voice that can tell us what we really need, what we just can't do without.

Lent can help us learn to prefer God, to be able to walk away from anything that is not God. Then we shall be a little less the prisoners of our passions, a little more free for others, and for God.

And that will be good practice for that day when – as the ash we are about to receive on our foreheads reminds us – the good things of this world finally turn to dust, and God is all we shall have.