

## Bishop June's Ash Wednesday Message

All around the world at this time of year, countries are celebrating the beginning of Lent. Some of them have huge festivals such as Mardi Gras, which I guess it must be cancelled this year.

And I'm at home in my kitchen, welcoming you to a new Lent because that's what we have to do this year. I'm ready, as you can see, to make pancakes for Shrove Tuesday, though, I confess to you that our family have a disagreement about pancakes at the beginning of Lent. Some of us like them with lemon and with sugar. And others think that there ought to be currants put in them. It's an ongoing yearly dispute. And one I guess we'll never resolve. But we all do agree it's a special season of the year. It's traditionally a time when we change our lifestyles when we're asked to simplify our life, to strip it down, to live differently, to perhaps introduce an element of self denial, and even better generosity to those in need. In the six weeks before Easter, we reflect on how we live and we look for some spiritual resources to help us. Well, this year, life has been so stripped down for weeks and months, that the beginning of Lent rather feels different, doesn't it? For myself, for instance, having almost all my life, stripped the house of flowers for Lent, never introducing any flowers into the house, I've decided to do it differently this year. You can see that I have some lovely spring flowers on the table. Because it has been like being in a wilderness already. These last weeks, life has been bare of things that we love. Life has been without zest. We don't have to strip our altars even during Lent this year. Because it's been done for us. They've been taken away from us, our churches, some of which are closed altogether. Many just feel to people a little unsafe to visit.

But this is still a call to a holy lent, it's still a call to a special season, a season with a purpose, a season - yes - of endurance. But endurance doesn't mean 'submission'. It's something positive. And it promises hope.

Saint Paul said that suffering produces endurance, and endurance brings hope. And our hope is not in vain. Because God's love has been poured into our hearts. And this Lent, therefore we're going to explore that theme of endurance through the six weeks ahead, I hope you'll join us in some way or other. There are lots of services, lots of reflections on our website online, easy to access.

But here as we start this Lent, I also want to recognise that we're missing something that I've always found a really important part of the starting of it for myself, and that is Ash - the ashing of people. And I have some here though you won't be offered it like this in churches this year because we want to keep a safe distance. It comes from the palm crosses that we will be given again this year on Palm Sunday, I hope in some form or other. We turn them into ash for the following years Lent. I'm allowed to put on my forehead, the sign of the cross in ash.

There are two significances in that sign. One is that it is a sign of my penitence. We endure within our vulnerability. We endure in the knowledge that our world is broken, and that in our own lives, very often, there are wounds that need healing. And so we come to God penitent.

We are sorry for our sins and receive the ash on our heads or use whatever symbol you can use at home.

It's an invitation to us to reflect this Lent on how we need God in our vulnerability.

And the other sign is in the symbolism of our mortality. This is not an invitation to be morbid. It's actually all too easy to be frightened at the moment. But it is to remember that we are fragile creatures. We are people made of dust and to dust we shall return. We live very close to our sense of our own limitations, don't we at this time? But knowing that we are fragile, God's love is poured out for us in that. So welcome to a Lent when we're going to have to find our spiritual resources at home, in our own kitchens, living rooms, wherever we can find a place of peace for ourselves. Perhaps joining in online services? We'd love to see you there. Or perhaps adapting our pattern of prayer this year. Because we are different, our Lent is different, and we have to pray as we can this year. And in that praying, may I ask you to remind yourself that God's love is poured out into your heart.

May I invite you to a holy and a very fruitful Lent. God bless you.