

Rev Dr Nathan John Haydon
St Peter's Episcopal Church, Ladue
Sermon
18 February 2026, Ash Wednesday Year A

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Assigned Lectionary Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Sermon

In his rule for monks, St Benedict writes about how Lent should be observed, saying that “During these days... we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of our own will ‘with the joy of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Thess 1:6).¹ In other words, let each one deny themselves some food, drink, sleep, needless talk and idle jesting, and look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.” I think many of us would have no problem with what is being said here, because overall, it is what we regularly hear about how to observe Lent. In short, the monks are encouraged to a time of prayer and fasting, and that can look like a lot of things. However, he begins this section on Lent with a bold statement: “The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent.”²

I think that some of us, for many reasons, would not feel so good about that. If Lent is supposed to be a season, then there should be a natural ebb and flow to how it is practiced, and with the intensity of the services, and the more penitential tone of the prayers and scriptures, maybe forty days of Lent might seem just about enough to get to Easter, and then we move on.

¹ Rule of Benedict, Chapter 49. Scriptural parenthetical citation added by editor.

² Ibid.

However, I want to encourage us to see this a little differently. First, even though what I've been talking to you about is monastic spirituality, I think that in some way, it can be advice for everyone. And second, I think it is good advice. I think our life should be a continuous Lent. I'm going to briefly explain why I think that is.

“Jesus said, ‘Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.’”³ This is how our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew begins today — with a call to authenticity. Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. And then we are given advice for what that looks like: When we give alms, we do it in secret. When we pray, we do it in secret. When we fast, we persevere through it without with joy. We watch our consumerism — a very practical concern, but then our reading ends with this: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁴ The reading begins with examining our behavior with consideration of what we will receive from God; it ends with linking what we receive to what we store in our heart. The things that we are encouraged to do, maybe even expected to do in this time—to give alms, pray, and fast—the intent is not to make us suffer; it is not a punishment. But they are given to us as a way to move us to having hearts that are open, so that what we *do* is aligned with who we *are*.

We will always have lives that are private, and lives that are public. But the way that we love God, love ourselves, and love one another should be authentic, whole, and fixed, no matter who we are with, no matter whether we are alone or with others. And that is what it means to have a life that is a continuous Lent, that with joy we always live our lives to have capacious hearts, where God and our neighbor can fully dwell, and that we could fully know ourselves, so that others can know us too.

³ Matthew 6:1 NRSV.

⁴ Matthew 6:21 NRSV.

Soon, we will be invited to the observance of a holy Lent, and ashes will be imposed upon us. This is a symbol of our fragility and mortality. But none of this has to be depressing. Maybe sobering, but not depressing. A holy observance of Lent can, and should, be a joyful one, because we are journeying towards the inexpressible delight of the Resurrection, growing our hearts as we walk the path of the God's commandments. A chant of the Eastern Orthodox Church proclaims it this way:

Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence; and let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments of Christ our God, with the brightness of love and splendor of prayer, with the purity of holiness and the strength of good courage. So, clothed in raiment of light, let us hasten to the holy Resurrection on the third day, that shines upon the world with the glory of eternal life.⁵

So return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful. Let these ashes be to us and to the world a symbol of victory that swallows death. Let these ashes be a treasure that reveals your heart, and brings you to possess a certainty and self-knowledge of who you truly are as someone cloaked with Christ. Thanks be to God.

AMDG

⁵ Matins, Monday of the First Week of Great Lent, *The Lenten Triodion*.