

## Ash Wednesday 2026: Benefice Holy Communion Gilling

Last week I was summoned to a check up on my heart which was fine, thankfully the organ that keeps me alive seemed to be in good working order!

But what about our heart in the spiritual sense? How is your heart today? Tonight, as we begin the season of Lent, this is the question that confronts us. We start a 40 day period of time, that is intended to be an intense time of self-reflection and introspection. It reminds us of the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness following his baptism, described in the gospels as a time of trial and testing. Lent seeks to strip us down, remove distractions in our lives, and helps us focus our attentions on what really matters in our lives - the condition of our hearts. Or, to put it in the words of Jesus at the end of our text this evening, where our hearts are.

For us, the word “heart” does not really carry the weight it did in Biblical times. We associate it with Valentine’s Day and romantic love and often leave it at that. In contrast, the word “heart” appears more than a thousand times in the Bible and is seen as a comprehensive metaphor for the true self. As one theologian put it,

*“The heart is an image for the self at a deep level, deeper than our perception, intellect, emotion, and volition. As the spiritual centre of the total self, it affects all of these: our sight, thought, feelings, and will”.*

So, to identify where one’s heart is means identifying what is at the centre of one’s true identity and motivations in this life. Our Gospel reading indicates that finding the location of our hearts is like looking to where our

treasures are. There are many things that we treasure. We first think about material possessions - our homes, cars, clothing, all the “stuff” that we have surrounded ourselves with to try to make us feel happy, successful and fulfilled. We can treasure non-material things, too, whether it is a focus on our physical appearance, our work, our reputation, or an ability, our family or relationships. There are many things in our lives that are important to us and that we value. Lent however, asks us to consider which of these “treasures” might be getting in the way of our relationship with God.

To help discern this, many use these 40 days as an opportunity to deny themselves something - from chocolate to Facebook. But Lent is about more than just depriving ourselves of something we enjoy or kicking a bad habit, and it must be more than about a good spring cleaning for our homes. It is about where our heart is in all of this. The key to any of these practices of “giving things up for Lent” is to remember that by freeing ourselves from these other “treasures” in the world, we believe we might be more open to deepening our relationship with God. Our hearts must have this intention to make it a spiritual practice, rather than just a self-improvement tool.

On Ash Wednesday, we begin to break down those walls, and we find we are left with a mess. The dust of our mess marks us as we place ashes on our forehead. We are reminded of our sinfulness and our mortality but at the same time we are marked with the cross, a reminder of whose we are, a God who not only sits with us, but went to that same cross that marks us this night *for* us, so that sin

and death would never have the final word. On this night, we can be marked with a sign of death because we know that we worship a God who overcomes death. The ashes are a witness to our belief that we cannot do this on our own - we are solely and utterly dependent on God.

As we speak the words of the Psalmist in prayer, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," we express our desire to get our hearts in the right place again, and humbly ask God to help us in that task. In these 40 days of Lent, may we trust God to put a new and right spirit within us, so that the treasures we have in this world, and indeed our very hearts, might also be with Him, who freely gives us His heart.

Thanks be to God. Amen.