

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Unless people see us walking out of a Catholic church, generally speaking we are unrecognisable as Catholics to anyone passing us by in the street or bumping into us in the supermarket. We dress the same as everyone else and are as average in our behaviours as any of our fellow-citizens. Except, that is, on Ash Wednesday. If we return to our residence from Mass on foot, or we decide to pick up the groceries in Tesco/Aldi before going back home, people will see the black cross on our foreheads and, in the majority of cases, will be reminded, through seeing us advertising the fact, that Lent has begun. Ever since my ordination I have generally tried to please my parishioners by making the confection of ash I trace on their foreheads as black and as large as possible (the children particularly love their cross to be very visible). You see, I am a little bit jealous of them because as a cleric on Ash Wednesday ash is sprinkled on the crown of my head, on that spot where a clerical tonsure used to be, and not on my forehead.

This year, following Vatican instructions on social distancing, all of us will have ash sprinkled on the crown of our heads and will thus have no black cross on our forehead to identify us as Catholics in the supermarket, post office or on our own doorstep. The fact that our sign of repentance and conversion, symbolized by the ash, and the reminder to us of our mortality is not visible as it has been in the past does not mean that for those who come to Mass on Ash Wednesday the first day of Lent does not mark a new beginning. If anything, it is a reminder to us that Lent is not a matter of externals, of penitential practices that others notice – declining chocolates, becoming a temporary vegetarian, giving up alcohol – but rather a change of direction that is known only to ourselves and God. *Let your hearts be torn rather than your garments* are words from the scriptures we hear in the Ash Wednesday liturgy.

Given that most of us have been living a semi-Lenten lifestyle since the first lockdown began last March (in the third week of Lent '20), observing what the Church recommends and expects of us is that little bit easier this year. We have a little more time to pray and reflect on the Scriptures. We can moderate our food intake without embarrassing other people (given that none of us are dining out or hosting dinner parties). And we have learned a great deal about care for others, often in the most practical of ways, over the course of the pandemic anyway. So, the three great works of Lent still make demands of us but the Lent *lite* which Covid 19 has imposed on us has flexed our spiritual muscles and made entering into the spirit of the penitential season that little bit easier. I wish you all a blessed and fruitful Lent.

**Father Patrick**