

Time to Remember Ash Wednesday

Psalm 51: 1-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

With this Ash Wednesday, we are entering into the forty days of Lent. Lent is a season of reflection- a time of remembrance and contemplation. The word Lent means “lengthening” or “spring.” As the days of Spring become longer, nature slowly sings a song of renewed life, energy and growth.

Lent as a religious observance began as a period of fasting and preparation for Baptism for those newly converted to the faith. Later it became a time of penance for all Christians- thus the name and use of ashes, reminiscent of the Hebrew practice of covering oneself in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of deep repentance. More recently, the period of Lent has marked times of fasting, prayer, repentance and remorse by placing ashes on the forehead or hand.

The forty days of Lent- not counting Sundays- begin with Ash Wednesday and end with Holy Saturday- the day before Easter Sunday. These forty day are a reminder of the forty days Christ spent in the wilderness just following his Baptism by John and prior to his calling the disciples and beginning his ministry. This was a time of preparation for Jesus, a time of fasting, prayer and contemplation. It was also, if you recall, a time of temptation for him as Satan attempts to get him to break his fast and give in to Satan’s temptations.

It is easier to remember and we tend to celebrate the happy times in Jesus’ life: Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday and Christmas. However, it seems as appropriate- maybe more so- to watch and pray with Christ on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as well as retreat

with Christ into the wilderness during these forty days prior to Easter. It is understandable why it may be easy to avoid Lent and Holy Week because it is often not a happy and uplifting time as we search our souls and our relationship with God. Even though we somehow think, that as Christians, our lives should be uplifting, wonderful, pleasant and joyous- in reality we know we are just as human as anyone else. The reality is that peaceful and joyous Christian lives are a result of daily efforts to keep an ongoing relationship with God. If we are not honest with ourselves and believe our feeble attempts, feel our intermittent connections of being faithful to God are sufficient, we miss the whole point of God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus did not face temptation, hunger, thirst and the agony of the cross so we would be exempt from the humanity of such things. Christ faced them so we would have dignity in them and remember that as we face our own struggles in life, we can be assured that we will share in His Resurrection on the Last Day!

During Lent, Christians are called upon to reflect together on the final weeks of Christ's ministry, remembering his betrayal, arrest, and suffering on the cross. Lent is also a time for us to reflect on our own discipleship and motivations in serving God.

Our Old Testament reading from Psalm 51 is a wonderful prayer seeking cleansing and pardon. It begins, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." It feels to me that it would be very appropriate to read Psalm 51 each of the next forty days.

In our Matthew scripture text, we find Jesus helping us examine with care our motivation as we live our lives. Three specific rituals of piety

are addressed- almsgiving or giving (vs 2-4), Prayer (vs 5-15), and fasting (vs 16-18). All of these are summed up in verses 19-21 which speak to our laying up of treasures in heaven rather than on earth. The issue seems to be the manner and motivation for giving, prayer, and fasting rather than if such is done or not. The indictment is that people who make a show of their giving, praying and fasting are engaged in nothing more than a performance. It is empty ritualism that may be rewarded with applause by the audience but has no lasting spiritual benefit for the person doing them- in fact, quite the opposite is true.

There is a tendency for all of us to want to hide our sins. But we enjoy parading our virtues and accomplishments. The Bible puts it the other way around. We are to confess our sins with our God and humbly hide from others how much we pray, how much we give and how often we deny things for ourselves for the sake of others.

Karl Barth once said: "Look at the face of a criminal and you will see what God sees when God looks at us." God's love in Christ was not poured out because humanity was elevated to some high moral plane or because humanity was/is so lovable. To the contrary, it is precisely at the moment when humanity is in open rebellion against God, that the love of God is most clearly revealed. It is life's ultimate irony: the pain inflicted upon Jesus at Golgotha was when the completeness and magnitude of God's love was revealed for the world.

The "treasures in heaven" noted in verses 19-21, are not literal, material treasures like those that thieves steal and moths or rust consume here on earth. The true treasure that we have in heaven is our relationship with God that is strengthened by the practice of spiritual disciplines. Our "heart" -our whole being and primary

emphasis- should be with God, not with things in this present world.

That we are reconciled with God through Christ is wonderful, good news. But the fact remains that the day of salvation begins on the day we put ourselves in God's care and that salvation grows and grows the more we nurture it. Even though we believe in and have experienced the power of God, we still encounter afflictions, hardships, calamities, sleepless nights, and all the rest. Ash Wednesday is a time to remember that our reality is both harsh and blessed. We are humanly dying and yet we live in Christ; we feel humanly punished yet live in Christ; we are humanly sorrowful, yet rejoice in the gift of Jesus Christ; we may humanly have nothing and yet through the promise of eternal life possess everything. Ash Wednesday, is after all, just the beginning of Lent, and the transformed, resurrection life of Easter will be fully experienced if we have prepared our hearts and minds to openly receive it in all the glory revealed by God.

We begin this time of Lent, remembering our Lord through the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We dedicate ourselves to use the next forty days prayerfully searching our souls and in contemplation over how we live. We return to this table of the Lord on Maundy Thursday to again remember our Lord through this Sacrament- just a few days before Resurrection Sunday.

The table is set- As we come to eat, may we prepare our hearts and minds through this video- "Communion Song."

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