

Ash Wednesday 2021, Psalm 51, Joel 2.1-2 & 12-17, John 8.1-11 and Luke 15.4-7

Let's take a moment to think about how we feel about Lent 2021 at the outset. And how we feel about being present here at this service either in person or virtually. What hopes have we been articulating to ourselves during our preparations for the keeping of Lent 2021. What expectations do we have of the church, of others and of ourselves? Believe it or not I know myself to be a little excited and ready to be surprised. This has to do with how I have personally benefitted from the keeping of Lent over the years beginning as an undergraduate with giving up something or other, but I can't now remember what it was. We were quite silly about Lent back then, not really appreciating its import. This being excited has to do, I believe, with the God we come to know in Jesus Christ in our wanderings, whose promises are true and whose nature it is to always have mercy, as so beautifully embedded in the prayer of Humble Access. Our approaching, our approaching into the divine presence is always to be humble or it should seek to be. We see as much repeated in one of the Common Worship eucharistic prayers at Holy Communion. "Though we chose the path of rebellion you would not abandon your own. Again and again you drew us into your covenant of grace." Today there are four readings to consider and I will touch on each briefly beginning with Psalm 51.

Psalm 51 is accredited to King David. He the king who was found out for his adultery with Bathsheba and the shabby way he dealt with her husband a loyal Hittite commander of one of his armies, Uriah. You may recall that King David sent Uriah into battle that he might fall by an enemy sword so that King David might take Bathsheba as his wife without anyone knowing the better. It takes the prophet Nathan's intervention to make it clear to King David just how grievously he has sinned, fallen, set aside and walked all over God's commandments, thereby failing to pursue the way of

righteousness and coming up dramatically short. Is there a way back? This is the background to Psalm 51, which is one of the great penitential psalms. It reminds us that King David's unmasking only takes place by God's intervention, till that moment King David could fool himself and those around him into believing he was righteous. With the prophet's intervention this way of presenting himself is no longer available to him. It is even more grievous when you realise that one of the things that set Israel apart was the quality of justice acknowledged by the other nations. The envy of the nations.

The reading from the prophet Joel, who sees value in corporate worship, calls the assembly together by a blast of the horn, the shofar. Here is a shofar with which I hope we are becoming familiar at Christ Church. Of course, I would love to blow it and thereby sound in this season of Lent, as a time for repentance, turning to God, the living God, and walking with God in Jesus to Jerusalem, as we prepare ourselves as God's people for Passiontide, Holy Week, the Triduum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and the celebrations of Easter that continue for fifty days. Let us rend our hearts as Joel calls us to. Let Lent cut deep for God, our God will richly pardon.

The reading from the gospel according to John tells of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery. How she is brought to Jesus by those who regard themselves as righteous. And we may well ask ourselves where is the adulterous man? But it is the woman and not the man who is dragged into Jesus' presence to be condemned and then stoned, but as we find out this is not Jesus' way. He who can look on the hearts of all present who have not learnt to rend their hearts. Note the location, the most public place, the temple precinct. It is the woman who sees the men all slink away with their tails between their legs. It is the woman who hears the words spoken to her and recorded for posterity. Neither do I condemn you! God does not condemn, but God

does expect her and us to sin no more. To turn from bad habits, to turn from sin so that we might have life again.

The last reading is taken from Luke's gospel completing our survey of today's readings alongside the reading from the Psalms, the reading from the prophet Joel and a reading from the evangelist John. This final reading to my mind is not only about the lost sheep that Jesus will go after like King David and restore to the fold. Are we to see ourselves lost because of our sin like the lost sheep who has wandered from the fold? The answer is a resounding yes, but we also know ourselves held close because of Jesus Christ. By our active observance of Lent we are keeping close to Jesus. No doubt we can be lost, we can be terribly lost as individuals and community or communities. We can wander from the fold.

Given that this Gospel is placed at the end of today's service, rich in symbol and word, I believe the purpose of the Gospel is given to see beyond ourselves. There is a specific Lenten missional aspect to this reading. We are being invited in Lent to share in the Good Shepherd's ministry. As community we can be Jesus' instruments of his Good Shepherd ministry. And so I invite each one of us to identify one person that we can go after and bring back to the fold this Lent. Is there one person you can phone, text, write a letter, invite to a service in person or virtually and bring them back? This is our shared ministry inspired and directed by the Good Shepherd.

I appreciate the movement of today's readings. Can you appreciate it as well? We come together knowing our need of forgiveness, of divine forgiveness and our need to forgive, that is a great and urgent need for many!! On Sunday someone attending the 1030am was struck by the *saying* of the Agnus Dei, especially because they had only ever heard it *sung*, which can mask its repeated plea for mercy. Singing may have the unintended

effect of prettifying or masking the dreadful price of our salvation. I believe the threefold Lamb of God, have mercy on us made this person uncomfortable, I can't be sure, but that was my impression, because how stark those words sound when they are not masked. And this fits with something I have been thinking to myself, namely as much as we deplore the pandemic and how it has changed and is changing our lives, some at least are more focused on what really matters. What matters in terms of our shared faith.

There are many who don't like Zoom, but know that they are called to be in solidarity with other Christians. If we all choose just to simply stay away and to cease from acts of service, acts of Christian charity, etc this community will continue of course, but how. Diminished. Occasionally I have had a sense that we are in some ways becoming stronger. And then no. And then again yes, even now people are enquiring about the Christian faith. New people have attended services. New people have joined the mailing list. Presently there is an enquirers' group. The voice of praise is never silent. The question about God, the quest to be right with God has not ceased. Blow the trumpet. Blow the shofar. Today's liturgy concludes with a call to each one of us to go out and be Christlike in bringing people back into the sheepfold. There is a corporate call to embark together on Lent. We who can be the lost sheep are also being called to the ministry of the Good Shepherd.

And between the call to worship, the blast of the shofar and the going out to be servants of the Good Shepherd's ministry there is that inward journey. Where have we offended against God's holy laws. Where have we failed in God's service. Where can we do better, where do we need to do better. We stand in solidarity with all those who know their need of mercy and grace. And we stand in solidarity in a common ministry called to minister and partake in the Good Shepherd's ministry of going out, finding and

bringing back through a great deal of nudging those who have wandered from the fold. There is but one Good Shepherd; to him we point, him we serve and to him we come asking for forgiveness knowing that if we see our sin for what it is our, if we rend our hearts we will be richly pardoned and restored to life. Let Lent begin! Blow the trumpet!