

Ash Wednesday 2023 – Joel 2.1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51.1-18, Matthew 6.1-6 , 16-21

No Christian who is alert to the times we find ourselves in in the West would deny that Christianity is on the retreat and no more so than in the United Kingdom, even with hopeful and encouraging signs of renewal here and there. Only a few years ago the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the UK had to stand down as the leader of that party, because of his Christian beliefs. Last week the First Minister for Scotland stepped down, which prompted Rod Liddle, a lead columnist for the Times of London, to ask, if there could ever be a political Christian leader in the UK again. It is extraordinary to realise how far we have come that such a question is no longer off bounds.

I share the above with you one because we need to wake out of sleep, but two and importantly because of the words of the prophet Joel we just heard.

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.

There are a few things that we want to be alert to and which will help us to make sense of this day in the Christian calendar. The God whom we worship and adore is as the prophet Joel says, “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding

in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” Our observance of Ash Wednesday is fully aligned with such an understanding of God, as made manifest in Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting that Ash Wednesday falls smack in the middle of the working week. It requires an extra effort for most of us to make time in our schedules intentionally to observe this day with the demands of life crowding in, but it is both a symbol of and a reminder to us that we want to put the living God at the heart of who we are and at the centre of what we do. As Joel writes, “with all your heart”.

Some of you are on your way to work and tonight others will be coming from work to attend the evening service. How does my Christian life impact on my work? How does it define my work? I began these reflections with a political example. The keeping of this day, the keeping of this season of Lent, as well as the keeping of the Christian year should also shape and inform our political decision-making and voting. We have an interest in helping to shape society, as we are being shaped by God.

It is evident that our keeping of Lent will not save us from sin and death. By this observance we do not replace the grace so freely given. Only God’s saving work in Christ can accomplish our liberation from sin and the last enemy, death. Our keeping of Lent is an anchored response. A response grounded in God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, creator, saviour, sanctifier and completer. It is out of gratitude, knowing our lives to be secure in Christ that there is in us a desire to conform more and more to a life lived in and nourished by Christ. Today we remind ourselves of our mortality, that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Today we remind ourselves of our sinfulness, our need to repent and our need of divine forgiveness. Our hope is in Christ and in him alone. We turn to him. He is our cornerstone. It is on him we build.

Today we are called to return to Christ - once again, as in truth we are called to do every day. To put aside the compromises we have made and are making with ourselves and with others, because the world and its vanities still have a hold on us. The operative word is formation. Paul the Apostle speaks of this formation, this being shaped, when he writes to the church in Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2) It is the question of what kind of vessel we are to become under God's sovereignty.

At the centre of the Gospel readings for this year are readings from Matthew's gospel, who brings together much of Jesus' teaching, as it was received and assembled in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. We need to remember that the words of the Sermon on the Mount are spoken to his disciples and the crowds who follow. They are not spoken to individuals per se, but to a people gathered. Those who are curious, those who are enquiring and those who have heard the call to follow and are following. We are an assembly. We belong to one another in Christ, but each of us is to make these words their own one by one so that as members of one body we might be transformed into the likeness of him,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

There are four words that capture today's gospel reading: almsgiving, prayer, fasting and treasure. What we might overlook is the refrain 'your Father who sees in secret will reward you' which is repeated by Jesus three times. In German this reads, Aber dein Vater, der auch das Verborgene sieht, wird dich dafür belohnen. If we make almsgiving part of our Christian response, if we observe a prayer life which is personal, if we make fasting a feature of our own lives and do so without advertising it, as the Gospel reading suggests, these things will bear quiet witness to the love of God in us. The light will shine. Surely and implication of these admonishments is that Jesus gave alms, had a personal prayer life (we catch glimpses of this in the Gospels) and fasted, providing us with an example of their benefits.

The observance of almsgiving, prayer and fasting combined with a right attitude, one done in secret, with integrity hidden from the eyes of the world brings its own reward. What is here defined as reward I would call blessing. In one of the thanksgiving prayers of the BCP we read and pray that we may receive all other benefits of his passion. Yes, we are saved from sin and death. Our future is secure, but we are also in *this* life to be transformed into his likeness and become more and more what God intended us to be, by the renewing of the image of God we have marred.

And the observance of almsgiving, prayer and fasting sets us up for the last one of the quadriga treasure. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting in secret help us in turn to learn not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth, but rather in heaven, with God. For by our right observance we are aided in learning that our treasure

is with God, in heaven. He is our hope. He is our confidence. He is our safeguard.  
He is our security.

In ending I want to mention the attitude that should mark our Lenten observance as we prepare for the keeping of Holy Week and Easter 2023. But when you keep Lent, 'put oil on your head and wash your face.' I always smile to myself when I hear the phrase 'put oil on your head and wash your face', because a good keeping of Lent does not lead to miserableness, but to joy grounded in Christ, as we seek together, as his people to observe this time for our benefit, but also the benefit of the Church and of the world, while being reminded of God's abounding graciousness, mercy and steadfast love.

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