

Readings for Ash Wednesday

17th February 2021

Old Testament Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.
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.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD, your God?
Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.
Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
 and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
 'Where is their God?'"

New Testament Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves

in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Gospel Reading: St Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A ‘Thought’ for Ash Wednesday

If we were having our usual service for Ash Wednesday, at the beginning we would hear the words of invitation to the observance of a holy Lent:

Brothers and sisters in Christ: since early days Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord’s passion and resurrection...

...In course of time, the Church came to recognise that, by a careful keeping of these days, all Christians might take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel, and so grow in faith and devotion to our Lord.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy word.

The readings for the day certainly have a serious note to them. The passage from Joel calls us to repentance, that from the second letter to the Corinthians urges us to be reconciled to God, and the Gospel reading from St Matthew speaks of a piety that involves giving, praying and fasting. We are left in little doubt that the path of faith to which Christ calls us is demanding.

On Sunday, I wrote about how Lent, whether we decide to give something up or take something up, is an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. Maybe you have decided what you hope to do this Lent, maybe you still have to decide, maybe you will wait and see what transpires. As I also wrote on Sunday, the important thing is to find something meaningful and that works for each of us if it is to help deepen our faith.

There is no doubt that to progress on our journey of faith takes determination and effort. However, as the writer Margaret Silf has said, we need to remember that to observe a holy Lent is not an invitation to a guilt trip or a time to obsess over our failures; it is an invitation of hope and faith that we can take another step closer to being the best we can be, the person that God has created us to be, in God's image.

We also need to remember that we have a God who is merciful, as the prophet Joel said: 'Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.' This was something that St Augustine, writing in his 'Confessions', identified: 'We reflect upon our failures, sins, and shortcomings, but above all on God's mercy as he reaches out to us – much like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son'.

In the Psalm set for Ash Wednesday (Psalm 51:1-17), there are three verses which make a wonderful prayer of faith and hope for this day, and throughout Lent:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your holy Spirit from me.
Give me the joy of your saving help again
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.