

Ash Wednesday – 26 February 2020

We gather today to acknowledge the beginning of Lent. Today is a day when we strip things back, look deep within ourselves. We begin to purge all that is unnecessary and look towards the new light, new birth and new selves.

In our Collect, Prayer over the gifts and Prayer after Communion we are reminded that God wants us as we are. God needs us in our brokenness to be the hands and feet in the world; not through pomp and show, but through giving of our very selves.

We will partake in the litany of penitence while we say "Create in me a clean heart O God" to remind us that even when we stumble and fall; even when we get it wrong, it is God who can and does forgive us.

We will receive the imposition of ashes, which have been made from the ashes of last years palm crosses. You will hear the words. "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Such words are earthy and profound. Remembering Genesis, ha'adam (literally Of the Earth) was pulled from the mud, the Spirit of God breathed life and the Earthling lived. When we die our bodies return to the ground, either through burial or cremation and scattering. A sobering thought indeed. It will be the stillest I've ever been.

In the Hebrew Scripture, from the prophet Joel we hear "blow the trumpet in Zion" (Joel 2. v.1, v. 9) which sounds the alarm and calls the assembly together. There is great fear in the words to gather the assembly together. The community is expecting something to horrible to happen...they are expecting to be punished by God for their "sinful" ways.

And God replies as a good parent would "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." (Joel 2.6) The community is called to observe a fast, to gather the people, all people, even the very young and the very old. They are called to come together to assure, once again, that they need not fear their enemies as they are chosen and beloved by God.

Matthew's gospel gives us four things we must follow in order to observe a Holy Lent. Almsgiving, Prayer, Fasting and Treasure. These four are as important in the 21st century as they were in the 1st century.

Almsgiving is what we do every week when we offer our tithes and offerings. The advice we are given is to give in secret, to not make a big deal about giving. To clarify; that we are giving is wonderful. We should give as much and as often as we are able. We MUST give willingly and with an open heart, not for the attention it would get us, if our fellow parishioners knew how much we give.

One of the most known phrases "the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing" comes from this Gospel. "do not let your left hand know what your right hands is doing, that so that your alms may be done in secret." (Matthew 6.2-3)

Prayer is the foundation of our faith. There have been countless books written on prayer; its significance, and especially HOW to pray. We receive some simple instruction "go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." (Matthew 6.6) In other words, don't make a big production of prayer. It is not meant to be a spectacle for an individual to "show their piety", rather it is meant to be a private message given to God, something that is between you and God.

And no, there is not a preferred way to pray. Honestly, I don't think God gives points on prayer form...only THAT we pray, in whatever way we can. Prayer as a written letter, or as a spoken word. Prayers as an intimate love-song or simply from the silence of our hearts.

Fasting. This is a tricky one. For folks who are diabetic or have controlled diet, fasting can be difficult, if not impossible. Again, the instruction is that should we **choose** to fast, we aren't miserable about it. We want the focus of these intentions to be on God, no on ourselves. If the only reason we are partaking in any of these is to boost public perception – then, quite frankly, we are doing it wrong. It's all about intention.

Finally treasures. Stop it with the "stuff". Do you really need another designer handbag? Do you really need a collection of souvenir spoons? Why do we always feel we need to have more than we already do? My freezer is full for the very first time. I usually grocery shop once a week. And with the generosity of the meal train I haven't had to grocery shop for more than bread and milk in over a week. My sincere thanks.

This passage of scripture speaks to me about rampant consumerism. Do we have to have the best of the best? Do we have to spend more money than we have? Despite the promises made online and on television, will buying the latest and greatest gadget really make us happy? The gadget might, but the MasterCard bill at the end of month likely won't.

Part of our Lenten Focus this year will be one of anti-consumerism and intentional reduce, reuse and recycle. It is our responsibility as stewards of creation to keep our mother earth as healthy as possible for years, decades, generations to come.

We will receive the Eucharist today, the greatest gift we will ever receive. As we receive it today, let us remember that all we have has been given from God. We live in a country where we can speak the language of our choice and worship without fear.

You hear me say quite often that we are to shine our light into the community in order to lead others out of darkness. This is true and vital. Yet during Lent I ask you to turn your light inward in order that we may come to know ourselves more deeply and our God more intimately.

Throughout my six week recovery I asked myself repeatedly, "Who am I"? When everything else is stripped away, it's just me and God in the middle of the night...who AM I? The answer is the same for me as it is for you. I am a child of God.

The difficult part of the exercise is the "showing your work" part. Where we do the deep dive and look at the behaviours that are not good. In my case over-eating. Eating unhealthy foods. Binge eating. Self-loathing. Self-doubt. Negative self-talk.

And through deep and often painful admissions to myself and to God I began to get a glimpse of who God sees in me. If you are interested in this kind of intentional self-discovery, please let me know. I'd be happy and honoured to walk with you as your journey begins.

Let this Lent be for us a time of self-discovery and renewal. That as we walk through these 40 days plus Sundays we greet each new day as a new start.

May today be a journey of faith through purification, admission, cleansing, remembering, reminding and going forth.

May today be the first step on our 40 day+ journey.

Amen.

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Joel 2.1-2, 12-17
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21