

ASH WEDNESDAY – REV'D JOHN GOLDSWORTHY - 17TH FEBRUARY, 2010

Well, it's Ash Wednesday again and we begin the six week period when we are called to a more rigorous self-discipline, but not just for its own sake. There are creative ways to practice abstinence, some of which may result in permanent changes that are beneficial for our health and wellbeing.

Our Isaiah reading today makes it clear that hollow, outward observances are an affront to God.

"Is this the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call that a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord?"

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness and to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer." Isaiah 58. 5-9

This is not the only OT passage where God demands social justice and compassionate charity.

We can say that Ash Wednesday calls us to three things: To look inward, to look outward and to look forward.

Looking Inward

Jesus once chided the Pharisees because they placed such emphasis on avoiding being made unclean before God by eating with ceremonially unwashed hands. This is what Jesus said,

"Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this is what defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

The word '*heart*' in biblical times was understood to be the centre of the intellect, the repository for our beliefs and values and the place where decisions were made. It was the kidneys which were believed to be the seat of our emotions.

So as we look inward this Lent, we do well to echo the words of the Psalmist,

"Search me O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting".

Looking inward requires attention to Holy Scripture so that we discern more of the mind of God and try to make his mind our own so that our daily living is more consistent with the character of God.

Looking inward, of course, requires uninterrupted times of quietness. Making this kind of time is a valuable, productive form of fasting.

Looking Outward

Looking outward means that we look for practical ways to put into practice the changes that looking inward has revealed to us. I have already mentioned the OT calls for social justice and compassion.

Jesus' miracles were never circus tricks just to impress people. St John consistently calls Jesus' miracles "signs". They taught something about the character of God. Usually, there was a strong element of compassion and always the meeting of real human need. There's that telling verse that says that when Jesus saw the crowd *"he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd"*. We have a number of programs here that constitute practical care and assistance for people. But I fear lest we lose sight of the fact that people's greatest, and often unrecognized, need, is reconciliation with God through a lively faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Which brings me to Looking Forward:

Lent looks forward to its climax in the celebration and contemplation of the events of Good Friday and Easter Day. Good Friday will be strong on contemplation and Easter will be strong on celebration. It is important that we allow scripture to instruct us on the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the benefits that flow on to us. The NT reading today points us to the incredible transaction that these pivotal events make possible.

"For our sake [God] made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." [2 Cor. 5:21]

This verse demands a full sermon in its own right and there is not time for that today. But at least let me unpack it a little by resorting to the language of finance. I have Biblical precedent for this.

For our sake God made Jesus, who was absolutely free from sin both in his inner nature and in his practical living, to have our sin, both inherent in our nature and in practice, debited against his account. This made it possible for God to credit to our account his infinitely perfect righteousness. Our sin is charged to Jesus' account and then by the mercy and free gift of God, Jesus' righteousness is credited to our account. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. As Peter put it *"[Jesus] carried our sin in his body on the tree"*. Jesus suffers and dies on the cross as the sin-bearer for the world. He substituted himself there for you and me. The just

penalty for the world's sin is paid. Terrible damage is done when we so stress the love of God that we deny the infinite justice of God. Jesus died not to satisfy a vindictive God as some see it. Jesus died to satisfy justice. A universe where justice does not finally prevail is nothing less than hell.

And what is the proof that justice has been satisfied and love has won the day? The answer – the rising of Jesus from the dead. And says Paul, *"The power that raised Jesus from the dead can give life to our mortal bodies."* And what is the proof that we have accepted, by faith, the gift of God's forgiveness and righteousness? That we do our best to walk in newness of life in holiness and righteousness all our days.

So, as we proceed to wear a little ash – the ancient sign of contrition and repentance – we have the opportunity to look inward, to look outward and to look forward.

The Lord be with you.

John Goldsworthy