

Ash Wednesday Reflections

Isaiah 58: 1-12 OT page 698
2 Corinthians 5:20b– 6: 10 NT page 178
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21 NT page 5

We come to worship on Ash Wednesday to mark the beginning of Lent. But I wonder of those of us here this evening ~ how many of us symbolically made pancakes yesterday to use up the riches in our larders or pantries?

Time was, perhaps when there were less worldly distractions, when the festivities and the practices of the churches seasons were far more significant in people's daily life.

Being more significant the practices had a context that helped the people understand their relationship with God, God's desire for us to know His Love for us and that Love shown through His provision for each of us. The main thing that happened on Shrove Tuesday was that the people were shaven ~ they made private Confession; originally to a priest but from the Reformation simply by taking time to pray and ask Gods forgiveness for the wrongs in their lives and how they got in the way of their faith. Then they removed the luxury provisions from their pantries by cooking them up into a special feast ~ pancakes with toppings! Throughout Lent food was frugal and God's provision more evident.

So people came to Ash Wednesday prepared to publicly share that they needed to consider why they sinned and fell into temptation and importantly how they could work to avoid sin in the future.

Historically, when it was politically important to be seen to be faithful, the people were marked with the cross in ash ~ created from burning the previous years Palm Crosses ~ and left church with the cross on their forehead clearly visible. Today we do not have that political pressure and the practice could be seen as boastful rather than humble so here at Immanuel for a number of years we have removed the ash from our foreheads before going

home.. This practice follows the scriptural teaching regarding prayer and fasting that tells us not to be boastful or loud in our practice but discrete and humble.

There are definitely types of fasting and religious display that God does not appreciate! Look at the Isaiah reading this evening. The people want to know why their fasting was not approved of

'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'

and God tells them

'on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.
Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Then comes the teaching of what a good fast might contain ~

A time to loose the chains of injustice and remove slavery,
setting the oppressed free.

A time to share your food with the hungry.

A time to provide the wanderer with shelter

A time to clothe those without clothing and

A time to put our own needs and desires aside.

Then God says that our light will break forth and we will know healing and others will see God in us whilst God will guard and protect us.

God will hear and answer our prayers because our hearts will be seeking to be right with Him ~ so we will call on the Lord and He will respond "Here am I!"

If you and I work to get our hearts right with God and God is

seen in our lives then we are told in 2 Corinthians 5 we will be Christ' ambassadors ~ His co-workers.

Paul invites us not to receive God's grace in vain ~ that is don't take it for granted! God has heard and responded to His Children ~ both Jew and Gentile ~ in love inviting us to return to a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. It won't be easy. For Paul faith incurred prison, beatings and false accusations. For us today the pressures are different and possibly the hardest to combat is indifference or family/peer opposition! If we persevere and develop our relationship with God our Father then we will be rich and possess everything we need in life even if we have nothing worldly!

Tonight's Gospel refers to how we practice our faith and what that looks like in the world around us. If we seek credit and reward now we are warned there will be no credit from God! We should go about our 'good works' discretely ~ as part of our everyday life. We should pray in the same way!

So this Lent ~ if you give up chocolate or wine, face-book, or twitter ~what ever it is ~ do it quietly and redirect what you gain without shouting about it. Better perhaps ~ take something on and don't complain about the sacrifice of time or energy!

If you have to tell everyone what you are going to do then it probably is not the right thing to be doing and if by the end of 40 days we all know you are struggling then that is your reward ~ there is no credit with God and that is not what Lent is about. Lent is about setting yourself right with God not looking good in the world it is a time of preparation to enable each of us to deepen our relationship with God so that we understand more of God's love for us and rediscover our enthusiasm to share that love.

Oh, and to make it slightly easier for us ~ we are allowed to relax a little on Sundays as we come to worship and the 40 days take us to the beginning of Holy Week not to Easter Sunday! Think about it ~ and do as the Spirit leads you to have a really blessed Lenten observation!