

22nd February 2023

Ash Wednesday

The Rev’d

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**Call To Worship**

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.

**Yet even now, says the Most High, return to me!**

Return to the Most High with all your heart,

with fasting, weeping, and mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.

**Yet even now, says the Most High, return to me!**

Return to the Most High, your God who is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who relents from punishing.

**Yet even now, we return to the Most High!**

**Prayers of Approach & Illumination**

Eternal One, we come knowing that we cannot rely on bread alone,

but on You, who are our drink and food.

Most High, we come knowing that You satisfy our hunger, and quench our thirst.

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.

Ancient of Days, we come knowing You blow through our lives and our world,

setting us free and giving us grace to follow.

Speak to us now as we hear Your Word, read and proclaimed,

that we may listen, understand and respond to your call, now and always. Amen.

**Readings**

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17*  | *St Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

**Sermon Notes**

Lent, in general, and Ash Wednesday in particular is something that many Protestants don’t know what to do with. Orthodox Christians go vegan in Lent, Catholic Christians are asked to fast on Ash Wednesday and give up things in Lent. We do have traditions of abstinence – some don’t drink for moral or personal reasons; some are vegetarians or vegans for moral reasons. The URC was very good at boycotting Nestle products so there is a tradition of denial for a greater good.

The Reformers were suspicious of Lent seeing it as a way to try and earn salvation; though Calvin liked Lenten fasts in the early Church but seemed to assume if a Catholic did it then it would be corrupt!

It isn’t clear when Joel was written nor what the emergency was that was facing his people. He calls them to repent in the face of this emergency and the repentance would involve fasting, weeping, praying and rending (tearing) hearts not clothes. The Jewish custom of tearing clothes when grieving was to be turned into a metaphorical tearing of the heart to indicate both sorrow and a change of heart. Jesus assumes fasting as part of life but warns against making it obvious so as to avoid false piety – he issues similar warnings around prayer and giving.

Our culture, however, is big on fasting – we just call it dieting. Our culture loves certain body types and sizes and there are huge industries devoted to getting us to change our bodies – fasting with a purpose but not necessarily a good one.

Ash Wednesday, and Lent, are about repentance. The Biblical view of repentance is more than sorrow but about turning around, changing direction. Contemporary practice seems to be to offer conditional apologies – if I’ve offended you then I’m very sorry. This smacks of PR not repentance. Repentance is real, genuine, and life changing and it is something we’re called to again and again.

Lent is given to us each year as a chance to take stock, to think about the direction are travelling and to see where we need to change – the oldest meaning of repent, after all, is to change direction. We journey with Jesus on his steady approach to Jerusalem knowing the inevitable consequence of that journey, knowing he didn’t flinch or turn away and reflect on the bullets we dodge, the comforts we seek, the pain we avoid and seek God’s grace to follow despite the cost.

Fasting might help with that reflection, prayer certainly will. Weeping might be a response to where God is calling us to go or move away from, Joel suggests rending our hearts is what matters – tearing our hearts way from what is bad for us and turning to what’s good. So if you fast this Lent – great. Fast and pray to seek where God is calling you to next. If you give something up this Lent – great – use it to see what else God might be calling you to give up. If you take something up this Lent – great – what else might God be calling you to take up. If you wish to express sorrow for your sins this Lent – great; just be honest and not use conditional confessions which mean very little.

Imposition of Ashes

Traditionally a cross of ash is marked on our foreheads at an Ash Wednesday service (hence the name). If you do this you should get some palm crosses left over from last year, pop them in the microwave for a minute or so to ensure they are dry and then burn them. Use a pestle and mortar to pound the ashes into smoother powder then pop a few drops of olive oil in. This mixture is then good for marking the sign of the cross on people’s foreheads. The leader of worship might do this or you might stand in a circle and do it to each other – you’ll need a bowl of water and towel to clean hands afterwards. When the ashes are imposed one of the following responses is often used:

*Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

*Repent and believe in the Gospel.*

**Confession**

We come to You, O Most High, with the tang of ash in our mouths and lives,

conscious of our sins, tasting as bitter wormwood:

the times we’ve failed to love,

the times we’ve failed to act,

the times we’ve failed to apologise,

all drag us down and haunt our minds.

We remember the times when we’ve hated our bodies,

when we’ve denied ourselves for no good reason,

for when we’ve not used our resources wisely

 causing others to fast due to poverty not passion.

Give us the time and grace, Most High, to turn around,

to rise from our ashes and be created anew,

to find direction despite our stumbling,

and to make our ashen lives an offering to You. Amen

**Assurance of Forgiveness**

The Most High, source of all mercy and goodness,

has, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

reconciled the world and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins;

through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace.

Know that you are forgiven,

have the courage to forgive others

and the strength to forgive yourself. Amen.

**Holy Communion**

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

God of all goodness and grace,

we have gathered to be bluntly reminded of our mortality.

You formed us from dust and to dust we shall return.

Even amidst the solemnity of this remembrance,

we give you thanks for calling us your children.

We give you thanks for calling us on this journey.

We remember that we are human and you alone are God.

In this season of Lent, we gather on a journey of trust -

trust that your creation does not end with our death.

Indeed, your creation knows no boundaries,

and, yet, we are bound inevitably to your will and your Word.

With all creation, in every time and place, we join the everlasting chorus:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.**

**Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.**

**Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna in the highest.**

Standing between past and future,

we remember the journey we will take again

while we wait for that blessed Easter.

We remember Jesus' birth into poverty.

We remember how he grew up in wisdom and in years -

 how he invited disciples to follow him,

 how he stood up to the powers that be,

 how he touched the sinner and challenged the saint,

 how he preached good news to the poor and marginalized,

 how he cared as much for people's bodies as he did their souls.

We remember how he gathered his friends on the night he was betrayed,

how he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying:

"take, eat, do this in remembrance of me."

Likewise, he took the cup and, pouring it, said:

"this is the cup of salvation, shed in my blood, for the forgiveness of sins.

Do this in remembrance of me."

For as long as we eat this bread and drink this cup,

we proclaim the resurrection of our living saviour until he comes again.

Together, we proclaim the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.**

Gracious God,

we give you thanks for your gifts of bread and wine,

send your Holy Spirit that they may be transformed

that we might commune with the body and blood of Jesus, our Saviour,

and we ask that these gifts will transform us to your presence.

We give you thanks that, even though we will return to dust,

you nevertheless invite us to this meal as a friend.

Though we are not worthy of the grace received here,

we are invited as the most beloved of companions.

Send your Spirit to abide with us that we may abide with you.

As we prepare to live as your disciples,

hear us as we pray as you taught us to pray, saying: **Our Father…**

*Eucharistic Prayer by the Rev’d Stephen M Fearing*

*http://www.stephenmfearing.com*

**Post Communion Prayer**

Jesus, holy and strong,

by your fasting and temptation teach us self-denial;

control and discipline us, that we may learn to obey.

Almighty and merciful God,

you hate nothing that you have made

and forgive the sins of all who are penitent;

create in us new and contrite hearts,

so that when we turn to you and confess our sins

we may receive your full and perfect forgiveness;

through Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

God of the desert,

as we follow Jesus into the unknown,

may we recognise the tempter when he comes;

let it be your bread we eat, your world we serve

and you alone we worship. Amen

*from the New Zealand Prayer Book*

**Blessing**

May the One who brings

new life from ash,

strength from repentance and

joy from sorrow,

restore, strengthen, and fill you with joy,

that you be ever more faithful disciples,

and the blessing of Almighty God,

 *or*

Eternal Majesty, Father,

En-fleshed Word, and Son, and

Abiding Presence Holy Spirit

 be with you now and evermore. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| O Matchless Beauty of Our God  | 101 |  |  |  |
| Jesus Invites His Saints | 434 |  |  |  |
| Come Down O Love Divine | 294 | 489 | 372 | 89 |
| Forty Days & Forty Nights |  | 337 | 236 | 160 |
| When we are tested and wrestle alone |  |  | 240 |  |

*RS – Rejoice & Sing* | *CH4 – Church Hymnary 4* | *StF – Singing the Faith* | *MP – Mission Praise*

**Also….**

*Led By the Spirit of Our God* is a contemporary Catholic hymn for Lent written by Bob Hurd and set to Kingsfold (I heard the Voice of Jesus Say). You need a One Licence to reproduce the words which are easily found on line or at 180 in the hymnbook *Laudate*.

*We Rise Again From Ashes* is another contemporary Catholic hymn by Tom Conry, easily found online (again you’ll need a One Licence) or at 198 in *Laudate.*