

ASH WEDNESDAY
21/02/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A call to serious religion

Trumpets sound twice in the reading from Joel. The first is to wake people up to the critical nature of the times. An emergency approaches in the form of an invasive, dark force, perhaps a great army that threatens to overwhelm everything. The trumpet is to wake the people from their complacency so that they will see the urgency of the threat. They won't be able to save themselves from this disaster, but they do have the power to turn to God in their time of strife. Joel associated the coming crisis with something deeper: the idea that it was taking place within the will of God. He equated the coming time with the Day of the Lord, a day when there would be a great sifting out of the hearts of humanity. This meant it mattered where the people would be found standing when the threat arrived. His message is that the community, which is attentive to the things of God and repents, will escape the distress of these momentous events.

The second trumpet calls the people to engage in serious religion: to hold a meeting and proclaim a fast. An act of discipline is called for that demonstrates the people realise the gravity of their situation and are committed to something more than more "business as usual". The meeting and the fast are to provide a means whereby they would re-discern God in their situation. That means facing up to the ways in which they had forgotten God and gone astray. It would involve recalling who God is, what God promises, and what is required of those who honour God. What is called for is more than outward acts. They are called to rend their hearts, rather than their garments. They were called to examine their intentions, and to respond to God in fresh ways. Ash Wednesday is for "re-noticing" our situation in life. It is a chance to recall who God is for us, and who we are before God, and to rediscover the proper relationship between things.

Traditionally Lent is a time when the church highlights the value of Prayer, Almsgiving and Fasting: disciplines accepted, not because we want to be more religious, or trumpet our achievements, but because thoughtfully undertaken these outward actions may help us to "re-notice" our situation before God. Matthew is very clear, pious actions done to gain praise from others is manipulative, and worthless. The praise of others earned is the sum total of the benefit gained. Matthew and Joel are concerned with what we set our hearts on. The outward gesture is meant to help us make the inward journey, to rend our hearts, not our garments: to finally be honest with ourselves before God.

The symbol of Ash is known and used in several religious traditions. Ashes derive their meaning from the fact that they are pre-eminently residue: when the fire has gone out, ash is what remains. In Christianity ash has been kept to remind us of mortality, that we were made of clay and live only by the breath of God. Confronting this truth has been regarded as a purifying, cleansing thing. The old Roman Catholic liturgy used to call for the priest to impose ashes saying: *Dust thou art: to dust thou shalt return*. It was a powerful way of making the point that we are mortals, but God is not. It was a way of

reminding us where we truly stand in the scheme of things. Ash is an agent that helps us to see our humanity, and place our hands afresh in the hands of God. If the Ashes do this, they will have done their work. The message of the prophets, and of the Gospels, is that God is for us, and God is responsive to a single-minded piety. And what is single-minded piety: faith that is truly humble because it knows the difference between mortality and transcendence. This is the path we take here tonight. Our aim is not to appear before others as more holy. Our aim is to seek greater congruity between faith and life. It is precisely because we lose our focus, because we allow the encroaching darkness to get the better of us, that we make a seasonal change. We get numbed or bemused by doing things in the same way and a change of season gives us a new focus, which assists us in renewal. On Ash Wednesday we pause here to listen again to these stories, and to take up this sign. We pray that it will help us to prepare our hearts to respond to God in fresh ways.