

**Ash Wednesday**  
**6/02/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Joel 2:1 – 2, 12 - 17**

**Psalm 51**

**2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10**

### **Sound the trumpet: God seeks reconciliation with us**

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Sound the trumpet. Joel's prophecy is an alarm bell ringing in the middle of the night. We don't hear trumpets very much, but we know the meaning of the sirens of Ambulances, Fire engines and police vehicles. Theirs is not the toot of the frustrated, impatient driver who thinks our response to a green light is a millisecond too slow. These are alarms, which prompt us to be on the alert for a crisis. Ignoring their sound means we may become embroiled in trouble or put ourselves at risk.

Joel's alarm sounds over an impending crisis (perhaps a military attack), which he interprets at a deeper level: Jerusalem had forgotten God and was living a disordered life. The surrounding armies are analogous to the coming of the day of the Lord, an awesome, irresistible threat, in the face of which those who ignore the warnings cannot hope to save themselves. The only path available is for the people to turn towards God and open themselves to God's mercy.

Two things could be said about the sound of Joel's trumpet. Its purpose was to awaken a sincere religious response amongst a people lost in complacency and indifference. It called for a rending of the heart, not the rending of garments. Perhaps you know what it is like to suffer from hardness of heart, and then to find something changes: the barriers dissolve and you find yourself free to enter into deep and intentional acts of making amends.

The second thing about Joel's trumpet is: its tone was the sound of grace in a seemingly hopeless environment. It was a call from God, who asked that the citizens of Jerusalem remember who God is, what God promises and what God seeks from us. No matter what threatened the people of Jerusalem the real crisis would be if they refused to re-engage with the source of their life.

Paul's ministry had a similar purpose. He wrote to plead with people of faith to become reconciled with God. The distinctive note of 2 Corinthians is that is God who seeks reconciliation with us. God faces our rebellion in the one whose journey we follow in the coming weeks. There we see unmasked our quest to have everything – even the power of God in our hands. At the beginning of Lent we are called to face this and to realize what we stand to lose. If we lose God, we lose everything.

On Ash Wednesday we receive ash as a symbol of the difference between God and us. In this action we are called notice all the ways in which we refuse to face who we are before God and to realise the extent to which we are ruled by things other than God: our fears, our obsessions, and our grandiose ideas about our capacities. It may seem like the sound of a death knell to realise that, next to God what we have is more

like burned out waste. But the true foundation for Ash Wednesday is to be discovered not in demeaning what we are or what we have. It is to be found in turning to the grace that has sought to reach us, even as we went astray. Ash Wednesday signals the opportune moment to take stock. That is because it is the first step on our Lenten journey towards Easter - God's chosen time for drawing near to rebellious hearts.