

Ash Wednesday
9/03/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 58:1 - 12

Psalms 51

Matthew 6:1 – 6, 16 - 21

True religion or false: are we serious about God

Ivan the IV, of Russia, was the first to use the title Tsar. Crowned in 1547 at the age of 16, he was convinced God had made him Emperor, and regarded anyone who opposed him as opposing God. His violent and unpredictable nature coupled with his preference for despotism earned him the nickname “The Terrible”. And yet he set out to make Russia a “holy nation” by deciding how the Russian Orthodox Church should conduct its rituals down to the minutest details. As his crimes and atrocities mounted, a monk named Basil the Blessed (+1552) challenged him. Basil lived as a Fool for Christ, a form of sanctity in medieval Russia, which entailed stripping oneself of all intellectual gifts and wisdom and taking up the role of madness. Fools for Christ were able to criticize those in power with frankness no one else would dare employ (Ware, p 108). During a Lenten Liturgy Basil thrust meat into the hands of the Tsar, saying there was no point in fasting, because he had committed so many crimes and atrocities his worship was rendered null and void. Others who tried similar tactics lost their lives, but this time the Tsar listened to the censorship of the Fool and treated him with honour.

On Ash Wednesday, as we enter into our version of the Lenten fast, the readings ask us to consider the difference between a genuine and a non genuine fast. In Isaiah, the speaker, who is authorised to speak for God, criticizes the people because they are rebellious. Their days of fasting led to abuses, and yet they continued to seek out God. What is being censured is not the fast as such but the fact that those observing it are not keeping it with their whole being. Isaiah is witness to religious practice, which on the outside seems serious, but at heart is self-interested. The truth is the people are not really serious about God. The practitioners made their workers work harder so that they themselves could keep up their religious observance. Quarrelling on the fast day raised the question of whether this was simply an external rite fulfilled for competitive purposes, rather than a genuine turning to God in humility, self-denial and prayer. The prophet is not saying: you must do something else in place of fasting. He is saying: fasting has certain implications. Fasting involves being serious about God, and that has direct implications for your life together that involved a certain form of self-giving.

Fasting is grounded in the people remembering who God is for them, but it does not stop there. The memory of God is of one who set the slaves free, brought justice to those who were suffering, and fed them when they were hungry. Such actions are supreme among the deeds expected of God’s people. The recipients of God’s liberating grace are meant to translate their gift into the kind of living that delivered liberating grace towards others by bringing the poor into their houses, feeding and clothing them. Genuine fasting is connected with the repair of what is fractured in community life. Its fruit will be seen as acts of reconciliation and restoration, which build up the community and nation. When God’s people act in such a way their “light

shall shine forth like the dawn”. The Gospels echo this thought when they depict the people of God as a city set on a hillside, or a lamp set on a lamp stand whose light shines out for all to see.

As often happens in scripture, faithful people will be given a new name, which reflects their vocation under God. They will be called “repairer of the breach”. Their acts of love delivered as justice will make them agents who connect heaven and earth, and make a difference in their community and nation.

Ashes are a sign of penitence and cleansing and they are a hopeful sign. When we receive the imposition of ashes with the words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”, it evokes the creation story. It tells us whose we are, and where the source of our hope really lies. Some of our ancestors in the faith cast off such rituals, because they saw them performed for their own sake, and therefore as meaningless and empty. Isaiah and Basil the Blessed did not call for the deletion of fasts. They found in these rituals, badly kept, an occasion for reminding us of their real purpose, which is to reflect whose we are, to engage with who it is we turn to here, and to issue in real outcomes that demonstrate what being God’s people really means for our life.

Now our journey through desert to the feast of feasts Easter begins. As we receive the Ash today, remember this. There is a correlation between Ash Wednesday and Easter. In the place where ash is received today, at Easter we will receive the water of Baptismal renewal with the words: “you belong to Christ”. In his company, we travel with hope.
