

Ash Wednesday
9/02/2005

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51

2 Corinthians 5:20b- 6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

What we do with our bodies affects the disposition of our hearts.

As this day for the commencement of Lent has approached we have seen a wave of outrage and politicking over the treatment of a mentally ill woman who had been incarcerated in a detention centre. We have seen vigilante groups forming to resist a convicted sex offender being allowed to live in a suburban street, and we have seen footage of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz with its attendant stories of the horrors of that place. If we had forgotten what sin is, we have at least been reminded, by these and other stories, of the human capacity for brutalising relationships. It certainly causes us to grieve and wonder at what has happened, and to fear for what is happening in the world about us. Worshipping at this time the four faces on our rose window shine with a deeper intensity. I am not always fond of Calvin's black view of human life, but sometimes you can see a point to it. If sin is missing the mark, or living against love, then humans are clearly capable of it, and it gives us pause to wonder how far we are from participating in horrific things.

But we did not come here to beat ourselves up! This season, the roots of which go far back into the faith of ancient Israel, is a time for facing up to the state of things so that we may refocus on the relationship that really matters. The prophet Joel interpreted his time as one in which a new threatening shadow had fallen; one in which the people would be held accountable for the state of their lives before God. Joel called people to demonstrate in worship and fasting their awareness of this, and their willingness to re-engage with God. The notion of "return"[repent] is well known to us. It has echoed through the seasons of Advent and Epiphany and again the prophet sounds this note. Fear may seem to have a part in his motivations, but what he wants from the people is in fact based on his understanding that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love; inclined to relent from punishing. Re-engagement with the God who has these qualities is Joel's aim.

And so we gather, with similar thoughts of re-engagement in mind, and with the intention of using messy things like ash to remind us of who we are before God. And, thanks to ancient Israel, the traditions of Lent encourage frugality, almsgiving, prayer and discipline as outward signs of our serious intentions to turn away from distractions and renew our relationship with God. Ancient Israel knew the value and perils of outward show, and this is visible in the Christian scriptures. In the light of texts like that from Matthew, Christians have been known to disparage outward display of piety. Some Protestants see no cause at all for doing what we are about to do and most of the four faces in our window would frown on us for this. But such practices have deep roots and belong to much older traditions, and Matthew's words are not meant to indicate that these things are intrinsically flawed. We do this because, with the ancient people, we have learned that while this is not, and should never be, for display the reality is that the habits of the body help shape the disposition of the heart. And if real treasure is what we seek, the refocussing of our hearts is crucial. The idea of engaging in a discipline for

Lent was born of a concern to displace obsessions and trivia and make room for things that really matter. The aim of Lent is to help us learn again what it means to live by the grace of God. At this the four faces in our window would smile. If living by grace is the refocus we seek, who can imagine life, which was exempt from charity, prayer, and the confrontation with excess?