

Ash Wednesday
13/2/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God

We entreat you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God. Paul's words touch on the key theme for Ash Wednesday, which is about refocusing faith. Isaiah and other prophets sounded a warning to the people. The Prophets offered criticism of religious practices that were performed only for appearances sake. A fast that was self-serving was an empty ritual displeasing to God. Religious practices that were accompanied by continuing conflict and injustice in the community were a particular concern. The prophets wanted authenticity. They wanted to see that faith and life were connected and congruent in the people. It is easy to miss the point of injunctions to prayer, fasting and alms giving. We know only too well the problems of competition, of improper motivation, of the dehumanizing effects alms giving may have on the recipients. We have seen prima donna piety which ultimately only has the self as its focus. And we know how there is a reverse sort of piety that takes pride in going against the stream and turns out to be just another way of putting self first.

But this does not mean we should abandon rituals or liturgical practice. The risk of hypocrisy does not mean we should turn away from prayer, penitential acts, or alms giving, or anything that serves to refocus our faith. Rituals have their place because the habits of the body have a hand in shaping the habits of the heart. It is precisely because we know how we get distracted and lose our focus that the liturgy calls us back again to renewal of life.

Each year as we come to this point I sense a great relief that it is possible to go into confessional mode to this extent. There is often a real sense of laying burdens down. There is a lot of sin around. The problems the church has been having with the scandal of abuse is far overtaken by the revelations of Lance Armstrong, and the drugs in Football debacle. And this is to say nothing of the current revelations of wheeling and dealing of politicians and people of influence in New South Wales, or even to reflect on the things that have happened to us in the last year and half. And it is good for people who stand where I do to be reminded that a sermon is a sinner preaching to sinners.

Ash Wednesday helps us. It is a bit like Advent. It calls us to wake up to what we are doing. It seeks to bring us *down to earth* by reminding us where we stand. The texts not only warn us about the dangers of false religion. They also offer us something more. Paul entreats us to be reconciled with God. And he shows us how that became a possibility because God has already chosen to be reconciled with us. Reconciliation is possible, because it is offered to us as a gift, in one who lived among us. Paul says; *Jesus, who was without sin, became sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.* That Jesus was without sin means that in him there was no resistance to the creative force of love. In his will and actions he presented no barriers and he became what we are created to be - loved children of God. But Jesus did this by allowing himself to become dust, clay, of the earth one of us. He allowed himself to stand in the place of estrangement from God, the place where we stand. By his work, in which God's love was fully at work for us, we are given the grounds for hope, because here we see we are no longer God's enemies but have become God's friends.

When we receive the Ashes on this day we are reminded that we are not God; we are made of the earth. We are also reminded that in Christ, who was made of earth like us, we are given a gift of new life. That is why at the imposition of Ashes we will use the words:

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Turn to life and a fresh beginning.

Ash Wednesday seems to be about sin but it is really about how God is still interested in us. Because of this we are free to seek God's will for our lives with renewed interest in another Lent. And we are free to face up to and cast off the habits and passions that distract us from the way to life. May God bless us on this new Lenten journey.
