

Ash Wednesday 22nd February 2023 Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matt 6:1-6, 16-21

Prayer: Open our eyes O Lord that we might see you in your living word, open our ears that we might hear your voice and open our hearts that we might receive you. Amen

Before we look at the readings themselves let us look at what comes before and after them. Joel Chapter one is pretty grim – a description of suffering – it is strangely coherent with our concerns today about climate change, oppression and war. The section after our reading is full of promise, of God's intervention and blessing for the future. Our text today on this Ash Wednesday, opens with the words: 'Yet now, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.'

In Matthews account of Jesus, he has written what we know as the Beatitudes – the BE attitudes. And expounded some of the commandments – painfully making them seem even harder – 'if you have even looked at someone lustfully – you have already committed adultery.' EEK we all think – what hope is there for me! And yet we know what follows in the gospel records: Jesus teaches, he heals, he reaches out to the marginalised, he makes a way for forgiveness, for wholeness – he dies for us. The rewards promised us for following his ways may not be instant gratification (which cannot last anyway) but is so much more – eternity in God's presence – a peace that passes all understanding, a love that knows no bounds. We KNOW that, even if it hasn't entirely reached our hearts and minds, even if the clouds of hardship obscure the light of Christ. 'Return to the Lord with all your heart.'

It is this that Jesus is calling his followers, his disciples, to do. What matters is not mere ritual but a heartfelt response. You see he was hardly advocating anything new. These practices had long been established in Judaism and of course should be part of our Christian spirituality anyway. This is not a critique of what most of the Jews did but the attitude with which it is done. It should be quietly for the Glory of God alone.

We may, however, remember the verse in chapter five: 'let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works...?' But, look at the reason, this verse continues: '*and give glory to your father in heaven.*' (Matt 5:16). So yes, pray, fast, give... but out of love for the wonder of God. So Jesus is underlining the purpose behind the actions. Not just so we get a nice warm fuzzy feeling for doing what is right, or so we get a nice pat on the back

(though heaven knows both are a blessing anyway – we are human), but so that God will be lifted up – that he will be made known.

(Only if time:

Back to Joel for a moment. This is not a bald ‘repentance from *sin*.’ That little word that is so easily caricatured in our culture as crime or as having sex outside of marriage! It is so much more than that. That little word sin is anything that is rebelling against God and his ways – including ignoring him or denying his existence and thinking we can manage all by ourselves thank you. Frankly the state of the world surely indicates otherwise! No Joel states, return to the lord with all your hearts (which incidentally in Hebrew understanding includes mind – so all your *thinking* as well as feeling). Return to the Lord and embrace all that he is and all that he asks of us, for, as Joel puts it ‘he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.’ And we know, when we experience that extraordinary love – (even if it is at first, just in our heads) as we acknowledge in the enormity of that love in the death of Jesus for us, our *motivation* changes. We do what God asks out of awe, thanksgiving, love. Love for God and love for our neighbours as we know just how much they are missing without Him.)

Perhaps also it would help to read Joel again and see that it is not simply (or at all at times) a *punishment* for sin, for going wrong. But *consequences* for rebelling against God and his ways that causes so much trouble. Hoarding stuff for ourselves, eating or drinking too much, unresolved disputes and so on. Let alone the bigger picture, beyond us as individuals, of Covid pandemic, malaria, cancer or expansionist warmongering, favouring shareholders over the poor and so on and on. It may seem overwhelming. But what we omit to do is just as ‘sinful’, as harmful, just as offensive to God. For evil to proliferate it only takes ‘the good’ to do nothing. To not write and object to bad practice, to not bother to recycle, to not engage with politics in decisions that affect us all.

Now I could go on and on about how we are not living aright in our 21century ‘developed world’ and therefore so much is going wrong. But baby steps – we cannot fix it all. However, we can try to get our priorities right. God first. We all know that wrong decisions and actions all too often come from hurry, hunger, hormones.... Not spending time with God. We need to slow down and take time to peel off the unnecessary and unhelpful to make space for God and goodness. To give ourselves time to receive from Him so that we are *enabled*

to give others that same care and attention. Then in love, our motivation is right, our attitudes show and others notice.

(Story of Afghan who on observing us (stressed and understaffed Christian aid workers), said – ‘you are different....I will never forget you.’ He knew we were believers in Jesus. And, we knew we could not do what we did without God, without the indwelling Holy Spirit ‘speaking’ for us. That lovely man *saw* God in us.

Practice – Lent is a great time for this. Spend time with God, listen, get to know Him. Develop this to become a way of life, the ‘let not your left hand know what the right is doing,’ in the giving of alms etc. Let it become so much a part of us that we barely notice. Like our feet on the pedals of a car – it takes a while and a few tears in the case of some(!), but you get there and then you drive without having to ‘sweat the stuff’ as it were.

Getting our priorities right – the motivation that Jesus is calling us to, that Joel prophesied about: ‘Yet now, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.’ Let us search our hearts and get rid of the clutter – material, emotional whatever – leave at the foot of the cross, repent –ie. Turn from our ways to Gods ways...

One of my favourite stories (glad Tudor isn’t here as he did the noon service – he has heard this many times) this is a bit extreme but it illustrates the point...

A refugee camp in Burundi for those escaping Rwanda – you remember that awful time? A friend of mine was doling out maize porridge to a long line of desperate and hungry souls. She looked ahead at the seemingly unending line (she was near a break time) and saw an elderly man smiling, and clutching a battered old tin mug, waiting patiently. She was touched by the sense of serenity about him and wondered if he was a Christian like her. At her break she squeezed through the throng to speak to him. She stopped and asked him his story. He told her that he had been in the forest when the rebels came. He could see his house and his neighbour’s houses going up in flames. He said, they killed my wife, my children, my animals – set fire to everything, the crops everything. I lost everything. But, said the friend – I saw you smile – how can you be so.. so at peace – she stumbled. ‘Well my dear’, he said, ‘I am a Christian – but you know, I did not know how much my Jesus meant, until Jesus was all I’d got.’

Amen.