

Ash Wednesday

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The story opens as the prophet Joel calls on the people of God to declare a time of fasting and penitence so that they will return to God. This sets the focus for our observance of Lent. It is to be a special time to “return to God” by recalling the covenant we have with Him and by rededicating ourselves to live in that relationship.

We are humbled in the act of accepting the imposition of ashes. We can no longer take life for granted or assume that the world was created just for us. We are called to “repent and live the Gospel life.”

Ash Wednesday sends us out into “the wilderness” in a state of humility. The Israelites were humbled by 40 years of wandering in the desert. Jesus confronted His weaknesses and temptations during His 40 days in the wilderness. The prophets often reminded the Israelites that in forgetting the wilderness experience in which they relied on the daily manna provided by Yahewh, they drifted from the way and the covenant of the Lord. Likewise, our 40 day Lenten quest is serious. We must deal with the fears and uncertainties of life. It is in hiding from fear and uncertainty that we attempt to make ourselves gods by assuring ourselves that we are powerful and have all the answers to life. We must let go and let God.

1st Reading - Joel 2:12-18

The name Joel means “Yahewh is God” in Hebrew. Joel prophesied in Judah, in Jerusalem, and most scholars think that he operated around the year 500 BC, after the return from exile.

Judah and Jerusalem were visited by an unusually severe season of drought, followed by a visitation of locusts. The prophet Joel was a witness to this disastrous plague. He exhorts the people to fasting, supplication, and mourning; for he sees in the present visitation the figure or forerunner of a more terrible catastrophe – the Day of Yahweh (the Day of the Lord). He is the first of the prophets to describe the “signs” and “woes” that will precede the final day of reckoning; the Last Judgment.

What we hear as our Ash Wednesday first reading is Joel’s call to repent.

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; ¹³ Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God.

Do penance, but be certain that your penance is not just an outward show.

For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. ¹⁴ Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing,

The hoped for result of the repentance is that Yahweh will respond and cease punishing and bless instead. Joel underscores the sovereign freedom of Yahweh (see Amos 5:15; Jonah 3:9; Zephaniah 2:3). There is a play on the Hebrew word *sub* which means “turn” or “repent”. Twice the people are called to “repent” (v12 return to me, v13 return to the LORD), then Yahweh may “turn” and have mercy. Although Yahweh is free and cannot be manipulated by the people, His response is not disconnected from their actions. The people hope for a blessing. Deuteronomy 7:13-14 describes Yahweh’s blessing in terms of agricultural, pastoral and personal fertility which was so important in ancient Israel.

Offerings and libations for the LORD, your God.

The drought and locust plague have destroyed the grain and fruit crops – there is nothing to offer in the Temple – with restored fertility, the sacrifices will be reinstated.

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly;

Blow the shofar. The shofar or ram’s horn was used for summoning troops into battle and for warning of approaching attackers. The shofar was also used as a call to worship (Leviticus 25:9; Psalm 81:3 (81:4 in NAB); 150:3). The shofar blast now heralds the observance which will bring Yahweh’s relief. Hebrew legend has it that the first shofar came from Abraham – on Mount Moriah the ram that replaced Isaac as the sacrifice was caught by the horn which was cut off to free the animal for the sacrifice.

¹⁶ Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; Let the bridegroom quit his room, and the bride her chamber.

Everyone is called to join the penance ceremony: the elders, the children and infants, even the bride and groom on their wedding night.

¹⁷ Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, And say, “Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Often in laments the sufferer complains that his adversaries ask him where his God is (Psalm 42:3 (42:4 in NAB); 79:10; Malachi 2:17).

¹⁸ Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

Yahweh answers the prayers of His people. The grain, new wine, and oil which the locusts destroyed will be replaced.

2nd Reading - 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

This second reading tells us to make this time of Lent a time for reconciliation – with God, with Christ, and within ourselves. This Lent is our “acceptable time,” our “day of salvation.”

²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

The apostles are God’s instruments – they prolong and carry on the mission of Christ in a unique way (see 2 Corinthians 4:10-11)

We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,

Christ was acknowledged as sinless (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; John 8:46; 1 John 3:5) yet through God’s choice (Romans 8:3) He came to stand in that relation to God which normally is the result of sin – He became the sin sacrifice.

so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We are now sons of God and co-heirs of heaven with Christ! We will share in God’s divinity (Romans 8:17)! We are not slaves who have no inheritance but sons who share in the inheritance with the firstborn son.

^{6:1} Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.

Human cooperation is essential if the power of the gospel is to act effectively (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 15:10).

² For he says, “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.”

Quotes Isaiah 49:8 (in the Greek Septuagint) exactly

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Gospel - Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

This Gospel is of basic importance for a Lenten program. The Gospel tells us to be religious and practice good works for internal spiritual reasons and not to put on a show for others. This lesson is made for the three basic works of Lent (the works of piety): helping others, praying, and fasting. This is our Lenten program.

¹ “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² “Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their

reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

In each case, a contrast is made between what the Christian is expected to do and what the scribes and pharisees do:

Help others quietly – we are called to work for the good of the body of Christ, not to turn the attention of others away from God and toward ourselves. God already knows what you have done.

When you pray, talk to God and don’t be distracted by concerns about what others are thinking. God knows what is in your heart.

When you fast, you are giving up something for God – something which you enjoy whether it be meat on Friday, chocolate, cigarettes, snacks, or whatever. It is a gift given freely to God and not a public penance.

In all cases, because whatever is done is done for the glory of God and not for personal glory/honor, God who sees all, including what is hidden in your heart, will reward you with graces. He will restore your inheritance.