

Sermon Notes: **Ash Wednesday**

Joel 2.1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58. 1–12

Psalm 51. 1–17

2 Corinthians 5.20b–6.10

Gospel: Matthew 6.1–6, 16–21

- The relationship between human sinfulness and human suffering is not a straightforward one. Sometimes sin leads to suffering, sometimes suffering to sin. In Lent we remind ourselves that God has no love of either one of them, that God's love and mercy seeks to release us from all that binds us up.
- We begin the journey to the liberation of Easter Sunday by acknowledging our need for this liberation. The penitence and somberness of Ash Wednesday is not an end in itself, but part of the movement towards freedom and joy.
- Ashes have many symbolic resonances. Their dark colouring reminds us of the darkness of a life lost in the pain and suffering of sin, their dirtiness of the way our own lives can feel dirty and in need of cleansing, their dryness of the lifelessness of lives not being watered by God's presence; their existence as the remnants of burning speaks to us of the remnants of our own selfish living, but, paradoxically, also of the possibility of fertilization and of new life rising out of the flames of suffering. Most confrontingly, they are a symbol of our own mortality, of the frailty and fragile beauty of human life. Wearing the mark of the ashes will mean different things to different people – each person should be encouraged to find this meaning.
- The Gospel for Ash Wednesday is a call to deep authenticity – to be courageously self-aware, to be honest about the things that motivate us, to explore what our lives say about what we treasure and what we ignore. Matthew, through the words of Jesus, reminds us that our inner lives are the place where God is at work – the secret place that Our Father sees. There are no secrets from God – only from ourselves. Repentance begins at the point where we face these secrets – not out of shame, but out of a desire to move through and beyond them to new life.
- We spend a lot of our lives seeking approval from others – an indication of the extent to which so many of us feel uncertain, unloved, and alone. In response to these feelings we often craft out a life of outward piety and religiosity. Unfortunately, this is not the path that will heal us of our wounds. Ash Wednesday calls us to let go of all of our pretences of holiness so that we might develop a more authentic spirituality.
- The churches preoccupation with sin has often been an unhealthy one. Guilt and shame do not produce long-term transformation in our lives, and they should not be the emphasis of Ash Wednesday. Rather, we are transformed through the forgiveness, affirmation, and compassion of God – all things whose reality we experience both from God, and through the Christian communities we are a part of. Ash Wednesday is therefore also a commitment to journey with each other through Lent that we might call forth the best from each other.

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Sermon Notes: **Lent One**

Deuteronomy 26.1–11

Psalm 91: 1–2, 9–16

Romans 10.4–13

Gospel: Luke 4. 1–15

This passage describing the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness is one that has commenced the season of Lent for many centuries in the lectionary cycle. The story is probably well known to most of the Christian community and has several potential layers of meaning for the preacher.

- The text is quite specific that Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit (v. 1) and returns from the temptations to minister 'in the power of the Spirit' (v. 14). This reminds us that God is present in the whole theatre of human life and shares with us in all of life's joys and struggles.
- There may be some intentional parallels to the temptation of Jesus described in this passage and the testing of Israel in the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 8.2). As a symbol the wilderness is the place of temptation and trial, of spiritual hunger and thirst. It is the place where all but two of the generation of the exodus perished, both spiritually and physically.
- The period of the testing, forty days, is clearly very significant (see Exodus 16.35; Numbers 14.34; Deuteronomy 8.2). This has obvious links to the season of Lent.
- The occurrence of 'the Devil', several times, may require some explanation. In this passage, the Devil's role is to hinder the spiritual progress of Jesus through the times of trial. Some of the voices we hear around us may be functioning like this (e.g. Peter in Matthew 16.23).
- The nature of the temptations are to distract Jesus away from the divine purpose and will. The number three is significant, indicating that the tests are now complete, however the Devil has not finished with Jesus yet (v. 13).
- The manner in which Jesus responds to each of the three temptations is to draw deep on the well of Holy Scripture, recalling for us the spiritual heritage of our own sacred writings.
- The temptations of Jesus appeal to common human needs and wants (food, power, immortality). Those hearing the sermon might be challenged to consider what would tempt them the most this Lent. A possible (vivid) illustration, where a parish has promoted the 'ABM Fast Food Fast', may be to have someone quite literally tempt the congregation with a variety of fast foods.
- How do we resist temptation? The temptation to satisfy our spiritual hunger with something other than the 'bread of life'? The temptation to be seduced by the kingdoms of the world and all their wealth and splendour? The temptation to rationalise God and step out on our own?
- Where we have failed and succumbed to temptation, there is still forgiveness and always a second chance. Let's do better this Lent!

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Sermon Notes: **Lent Two**

Genesis 15: 1–12, 17–18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3: 17–4:1

Gospel: Luke 13. 6–9

WAITING FOR FRUITFULNESS

- The reading from Genesis introduces the theme of “waiting for fruitfulness.” A preaching point could be on what is involved in waiting for things to bear fruit. Is it a passive waiting or an active expectation? The Genesis reading emphasizes questioning, sacrifice, unknowing (darkness), promise, covenant and greatness. Natural images of fruitfulness include the numberless stars and the great river.
- Psalm 27 has an emphasis on “hope under siege.” The God who protects us from the enemy within and without is a strong theme. The last two verses of the psalm express hope in the context of “waiting for fruitfulness.” A preaching point here is that protection from all that destroys is essential to make it possible for hope to be realized.
- In the Philippians reading, there is encouragement and judgment based on a distinction between two kinds of citizenship: earthly and heavenly. In this reading the earthly life is portrayed as anything but fruitful; the heavenly life is portrayed as a means to transformation. The focus of this is once again “waiting for fruitfulness” in this case the expectation of the Saviour, Jesus Christ.
- Preaching on this text needs to be done with some care, as it may be misconstrued as a call to deny the fruitfulness of life in a negative rather than a positive sense. Positive self denial is that which leads to fruitfulness and transformation, as we seek to align our life in the body with the living body of Christ. This is at the heart of the encouragement Paul is offering the Philippians community.
- In the Luke reading, the theme “waiting for fruitfulness” comes to the fore in the parable of the Fig Tree. One approach to this might be to invite hearers to consider which of the two characters in the gospel – the Vineyard Owner and the Gardener – most closely resembles their image of God. Another would be to consider the Gardener’s suggestion in terms of the mission of the church.
- The reference to digging around and putting manure on the soil are strong images in relation to our life and mission: doing something different; seeing whether a different approach will bring the desired result: giving things another chance; waiting in expectation. It might be possible to apply this principle to particular projects in the local and/or wider church.
- A final consideration is the environmental one. Any gospel which refers to the interaction of humanity with nature carries with it the possibility to apply it to the environmental realities we currently face, such as climate change and global warming. There is a clear link in this between the Genesis and Luke readings.

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Sermon Notes: **Lent Three**

Isaiah 55.1–9; 1

Psalm 63.1–9

Corinthians 10.1–13

Gospel: Luke 13.31–35

- Jesus reflects on his mission and its ultimate climax, his death and resurrection.
- The theme of the divinely appointed task is strong throughout.
- No threat of death will stop the liberating program in which he is engaged.
- Jesus speaks twice of his mission in terms of three days, surely foreshadowing the resurrection.
- He is aware that on the 'third day' he will be killed in Jerusalem.
- Historically Jerusalem has not responded kindly to prophets of God; conflict between prophet and people commonly took place in Jerusalem or even in the Temple.
- Jesus' tone in the lament over Jerusalem does not condemn, rather, he grieves for those who have not responded to his message.
- Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple and the abandonment of the 'house' of Jerusalem.
- The journey is staged and he will not be seen in Jerusalem before the allotted time.
Several stages of the journey have to unfold according to plan.
- Love and fear – the two sides of the same coin.
- Jesus offers love, liberty and life, the response of the multitude is to lash out in fear. Why?

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Sermon Notes: **Lent Four**

Joshua 5. 2–12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5.16–21; Luke 15.11–32

Gospel: Luke 15. 11–32

- Today's readings speak to us about the nature of God as one who repairs that which is broken, who restores those who are damaged, who seeks out those who have wandered, who welcomes those who return. We discover in these texts the picture of God who is always with us in the ups and downs of our lives, whose very nature is directed towards our well-being. Astonishingly, we realise that we are not peripheral to this God, but central.
- The parable of the lost son is part of a set of three parables about things being lost – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. As the parables are told there is an increase in their intensity – one out of a hundred sheep, one out of ten coins, one out of two sons. The increasing intensity speaks to us of the intensity of God's desire for us, and of how much there is at stake for God. These parables turn everything around. Instead of asking us, 'Do you know how important God is for you?' they ask, 'Do you know how important you are to God?'
- When we meet the second son in the story – the one who has stayed home – we hear an echo of the Gospel reading from Matthew for Ash Wednesday. This son has sought approval through outward acts of obedience, but in doing so has cut himself off from the heart of his father. It is so easy for us to be like this son – we look good on the outside, but inside our hearts have turned to stone.
- Both the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert and of the son wandering from home have a strong metaphorical meaning – that it is only when we have ventured into the desert that we begin to see things clearly. These desert experiences will be different for all of us – the actual reality of leaving the parental home, a time of being away from the church, a time of being unemployed, the end of a relationship, the death of someone close to us, a period of serious illness or depression. It is easy to dismiss these experiences as being 'bad'. We wish we didn't have them. Today's readings remind us that they can be the seed of a new time of fruitfulness in our lives.
- It is often remarked that the behaviour of the father in the story of the lost son is very unexpected – he throws away any sense of restraint or social decorum in his joy to welcome back the son he thought was dead. In the light of this we might reflect on the way we restrain ourselves, on the ways we allow social mores to dictate our responses. Is the joy of the father in this parable evident in our churches?
- Many people in our society feel lost – cut off from affection, from meaning, from hope. Today's Gospel is a powerful call to show unrestrained compassion to all who feel this way, to open wide our arms in welcome and embrace. How does your church imitate the actions of the father in the parable in welcoming and embracing those who are seeking a friendly face?

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Sermon Notes: **Lent Five**

Isaiah 43.16–21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3.3–14

Gospel: John 12.1–8

This passage from John's Gospel occurs at a critical juncture in the narrative, bringing to an end the 'book of signs' (John chs. 1–12) and forming a bridge to the remaining chapters ('the book of glory'). Mary's act of devotion has strong burial connotations, foreshadowing the crucifixion and burial of Jesus and, from our perspective, the church's journey through Holy Week.

- Nard was a rare and precious spice imported from India. It was well known in the ancient world (being described at length by Pliny in his 'Natural History', 12.24–26). Nard has a sweet scent, like gladiola perfume, and was red in colour.
- John, writing as an eyewitness, recalls the house being filled with the fragrance of the Nard (v. 4). A memorable and engaging illustration of this might be to have some comparable perfume present in the church (having first warned allergy sufferers).
- The great cost of the Nard (v. 3) meets with an objection from Judas, the group's treasurer and eventual betrayer (parallels to the parish treasurer ought to be avoided here). The point is that Mary's act of devotion is very costly.
- As a further act of devotion Mary wipes the feet of Jesus with her hair. As mentioned above, there are clear connections to the customs surrounding burial anointing here, indicated by Jesus himself in v. 8 (see also John 19.39) and possibly a foreshadowing also of the foot washing to occur in Ch.13. Also, in a sociological sense, the letting down of a woman's hair was considered to be sexually alluring. Mary is taking a risk (much like the repentant women in Luke 7. 36–50).
- The extravagance of Mary's gift is made clear by Judas in v. 5. It was worth a year's wages! This may, and no doubt will, seem wasteful to others, and not just Judas (although his reasons are selfish, v. 6). The reply of Jesus, 'you will always have the poor among you' (v. 8) reflects the social reality without passing any comment on its moral standing. In this context, the extravagance of Mary's devotion is fitting and accepted as such by Jesus.
- The challenge in this passage is clearly that of Mary's great devotion. What gift do I bring to lay at the feet of Jesus? What have I poured out for the kingdom of God this Lent? It need not be a year's wages, but it ought to be something.
- Parallels may be drawn here to Paul's use of the fragrance metaphor in 2 Corinthians 2. 14–16. Where have I been the 'fragrance of Christ' this Lent?

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