

Wed 14th February 2018 Cathedral, Grahamstown 6 p.m.		Ash Wednesday 2018	
Joel 2:1-2,12-17	Ps 51:1-17	2 Cor 5:20b-6:10	
		Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21	
NEW BEGINNINGS			

“Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me wholeheartedly with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate...” (Joel 2:12-13a)

1st POINT – Ash Wednesday and Lent

Today - Ash Wednesday - marks the start of the season of Lent, the 40 days, excluding Sundays, between now and Easter. Here in the Cathedral, together with Christians all over the world at this time, we mark Lent with outward signs and symbols: the colour purple, for sorrow and mourning; the church is stark and undecorated – the banners have been removed from the High Altar; no flowers until Easter; the ashes on our foreheads an outward symbol of our penitence; the Ten Commandments which we repeat each Sunday. Why do we do this?

Lent is designed to help us to take an honest look at ourselves; to repent and turn from wrong-doing. It is a time of retreat and withdrawal to hear God speak to us. It is a time of spiritual renewal.

In doing all this, we follow the example of Jesus.

After Jesus was baptised, he went into the wilderness for 40 days, where he fasted, he prayed, he was tempted, he was amongst the wild animals; he faced the demons. He prepared for the ministry and the challenges that lay in front of him.

In the same way, these 40 days of Lent are our time in the wilderness. During Lent, we enter our inner wilderness. We face our own demons and temptations. We take a look at our lives. We face up to destructive, wrong behaviour on our part. We acknowledge our role, our responsibility, in what has gone wrong. This is a time for soul-searching: to search our souls and examine our hearts. To listen for the voice of God. To be completely honest with ourselves and with God.

Any top athlete – and the Winter Olympics are on as we speak - will tell you that behind the gold medals, the success, the victories, the public displays of strength and stamina and ability, lie hours and hours of training and preparation and hard work. Without those hidden hours and discipline of preparation, nothing will be achieved when the race comes.

It is the same for us. Our Lenten time of retreat and soul-searching, listening to God, allowing God to purify us and shape us, is how we prepare ourselves for whatever awaits us.

2nd POINT – Our readings

The call of God to repentance: Joel 2:12-13

“Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me wholeheartedly with fasting, weeping... turn back to the Lord your God...” (Joel 2:12-13a)

Words to the nation of Israel from the prophet Joel: they were facing destruction and judgement. It was a time of national crisis. This was their last chance to turn things round; the sense of impending doom; a solemn warning; no room for complacency!

The Ash Wednesday call is to return to God. To find our hope and rootedness and belonging in him.

Our answer to this call: Ps 51:10

“Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (51:10).

It is personal - “create in *me* a clean heart” – as we face some home truths, as we take an honest look at ourselves, as we own up to uncomfortable things and harsh realities.

The appeal to be reconciled to God: 2 Corinthians 5:20ff.

“... we implore you [we entreat you] in Christ’s name, be reconciled to God!” (5:20b)

God’s mercy and love and grace is not only a word of judgement and condemnation and warning (Joel); it is also a word of love and invitation – a word of salvation through the cross of Christ – what God has done for us in Christ:

“Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with human sinfulness, so that in him we might be made one with the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21)

The appeal, the call, the invitation, is based on the act of God in Christ. The good news of the gospel. The mercy and grace of God.

The three-fold pattern for Lent, of give, pray, fast - Matt 6

The three spiritual disciplines that help us overcome the three great temptations of money, sex [or bodily appetites] and power.

Give – it helps us look beyond ourselves to others; it helps to free us from our dependence on material goods. We give to overcome the temptation of wealth.

Pray – we focus our attention on God, we rest in God’s presence, we listen for God’s voice, we bring all that we are to God. We pray so that we may overcome the temptation of power.

Fast – it helps clear out the clutter in our lives. We may fast by giving up certain food or drink, or by eating less; some will say no to alcohol, to coffee or tea (caffeine), chocolate, cigarettes, junk food; TV; or even to facebook. We fast so that we may be physically and spiritually purified and cleansed and strengthened. We fast to overcome the temptation of our bodily appetites.

3rd POINT – Repent – turn from sin

And we repent. We change direction. We turn from wrong behaviour, wrong attitudes. We face up to damage and hurt that we have caused. We acknowledge our destructive behaviour. We stop blaming others for what has gone wrong, and ask what part we have played in it all.

There is so much around us that is broken, wounded, in need of healing: households where there is neglect and abuse and drunkenness; hatred and fear and violence; drugs all too easily available that are destroying young minds and lives; people living self-centred, greedy lives. And on a national political level, there is corruption, dishonesty, and abuse of power. It is easy to point fingers and look at what others need to do to put things right.

But repentance, turning from sin, must and should start with you and me. It is our changed lives and hearts that become the catalyst for the transformation of our families, neighbourhoods, communities, country.

We are indeed facing a national crisis: the drought in many parts of our country, especially in the Western Cape; and the political and moral crisis brought upon us by Jacob Zuma. And here in Grahamstown, as roads continue to deteriorate and the municipality is essentially bankrupt, we have a crisis.

And on a personal note, perhaps some of us are facing a crisis: there may be sickness in the home; a crisis at work; a son or daughter going

off the rails and in trouble; a personal sense of despair, feeling lost; feeling completely overwhelmed, scared, helpless, alone; desperate.

We fear a crisis. But crises force change upon us. I was struck, on my brief visit to Cape Town last week for my uncle's funeral, just how much people have changed their behaviour because of the drought in the Western Cape. Change is not an optional extra, if we feel like it. We change because to change is to live; to remain the same, to remain in the same place, is to die.

Repentance, turning around, turning to God, becomes a matter of finding life once again. To enter the desert, the wilderness, is to step out of our comfort zones. It is to enter this time of spiritual dying – dying to self – so that we may find life, true life.

Richard Rohr speaks of crises that push us into change. The prophet Jonah who is thrown overboard. Jesus who is sent out into the wilderness. Going into darkness. Discovering God's grace in those dark places. We have to learn the language of descent. Of dying. Of letting go. Of opening ourselves to God.

CONCLUSION

“Here I am, Lord. Do your work of healing and transformation. Bring healing to our broken world. But begin with me.”

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