

## Ash Wednesday – 01 March 2017

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a; 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I welcome you here today. ... I welcome you not to a place that is filled to overflowing with beauty and joy and excitement and a sense of glory, but rather I welcome you to a place that is darker than we care to admit; a place that is filled with a quiet, and maybe even a heaviness that we usually try not to associate with the world of church. I welcome you to Lent.

There is an understanding in the church world that while we walk through the season of Lent, we get to break the fast on Sundays. While we seem to figuratively wear sackcloth and ashes throughout the week, we sometimes think that come Sunday we can forget everything that is difficult and maybe even despairing about this long liturgical season. And maybe, once upon a time, in a generation long ago, on Sundays we could have thrown off the Lenten shroud and celebrated a Sunday feast that promised a foretaste of the Easter Season and even then, the eternity, that was to come. But times have changed in the world and in the church. No longer is Lent such an all-encompassing season that it could not be escaped and Sunday's breaking of the fast was needed as much as food to a starving man. Our world seems to simply pay lip service to Lent these days and that is a shame because it is a necessary season in the life of a person, whether they realize it or not.

I learned the hard truth of this reality first hand. I once worshiped in a church that refused to acknowledge the Passion part of Passion Sunday, which begins with the Liturgy of the Palms. They only wanted to participate in the Triumphal Entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. They wanted to wave their palm branches and crosses and sing Hosannas. They did not want to think about the way the story unfolds as Jesus walks toward Good Friday. Most of this congregation would not attend any Holy Week services and would just show up on Easter morning with their Easter clothes and smiles of triumph and great joy. They managed to skip over the entire Passion of Christ. Lent made them uncomfortable and they considered Holy Week unnecessary. And Good Friday was just the beginning of the long weekend.

One Ash Wednesday things took on a new reality for the congregation. One of the older, most respected members received a diagnosis of cancer. This was a congregation in which everyone was related by blood or marriage or property lines and not one person was left untouched by the horror of his diagnosis. The Church was their centre, that place where everyone collected for everything, and so, as Lent proceeded, the community walked together through more tests and treatments and waiting for results and wondering and worrying all the "what now's" and "what ifs". The whole church family was thrown into shock and then into a sort of communal depression as they dealt with the realities of pending death in their midst.

Even though they were faithful church-goers and heard the stories of difficulty in the Old and New Testaments over the years, the reality of some of those Scripture lessons had never

before hit home. And then, all of a sudden, they did. People started to talk about Job and Jonah and the Israelites wandering for 40 years – “can you imagine feeling like this for 40 years?” I heard this man’s daughter ask.

For so very long, the church and the liturgical seasons had all seemed to be a comfortable place to meet up and do their duty to God and to talk about their duty to Queen and country. They had never been forced to look into the Passiontide and see themselves walking alongside Jesus through the really difficult times. They had never had to come face to face with the truth that as they walked alongside Jesus from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday within the church world, Jesus had been walking alongside them day in and day out, through good times, and now bad, all along.

As the season of Lent unfolded, the community quietly kept coming together, weeping as they cried out “Crucify him! Crucify him!” on Passion Sunday morning; sitting shoulder to shoulder, evening after evening during Holy Week; allowing the priest to wash their feet (and wipe away their tears) on Maundy Thursday night; sitting in shocked silence as they heard the echo of John’s account of the Passion Narrative on Good Friday morning.

Come Holy Saturday evening, when the priest opened the church and prepared to light the new fire from which the Christ candle would be lit; the fire that would illuminate the Bible as the story of God’s love for humanity from creation through redemption was shared; there were more than just the usual 4 or 5 people gathered. Before the priest was the entire congregation, in the centre of which was that old man leaning on a cane, a shell of the man he was so few months before. They were all tired. They had all walked a Lenten journey that drew from the depths of their souls and caused them to wonder where God had been in all of this. Their journey brought them back to the place that they knew was home – their church and their church family.

As the liturgy unfolded, the stories told as they gathered in darkness, with only those flickering candles to light the path, a sense of warmth began to infuse the community. When the lights came on and the bells chimed and the alleluias were once again proclaimed, there was a communal sense of understanding and peace. They understood, finally, that their own Lenten seasons, whatever time of the year or season of life they happen in, cannot simply be ignored. They also began to recognize that Easter does not bring back what once was, but it brings with it what will be. And what will be, if it is in and through Christ, is worth that journey with Christ all along.

All of us who are gathered here today, and all of those who aren’t but who will join us on Sundays between now and Easter Day, are in for a journey that will not be easy. Lent is a time of growth that comes not so much from running toward other things, reaching out and grasping what we think we need or want. Quite to the contrary, Lent can more faithfully be about allowing ourselves to look in, discovering that dark and scary path that we all have to face and some point. But Lent also gives us the gift of knowing that we do not walk that dark and dimly lit path alone.

Jesus walks beside us, each and every step of the way. And we walk beside one another, if we will allow others to join us.

Whether our own personal Lent falls from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day in 2017 or if it lands after a doctor's appointment or a conversation with a loved one, or even if we simply wake up one morning and realize that the sun may be shining out there in the world but it doesn't seem to shine in our own lives, we need to be willing to walk the holy way of Lent. We need to give ourselves permission to wear the sackcloth and ashes, and believe that we too will come to our Easter Day of Resurrection as well. Jesus will walk every step of the way with us. We just have to be willing to keep on walking through our Lent, and resist the temptation to pretend it doesn't really exist.

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And I invite you to observe a Holy Lent that will help you to grow and become ready for that Easter resurrection that does surely await you at the end of this Lenten season.