

Ash Wednesday

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

February 17, 2021

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17    Psalm 103:8-14    2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10    Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The beginning of Lent is the beginning of a new season in the Church's year. Like the natural seasons of the year, each new church season leads us into a time of change. In Lent we reflect this change by changing the colors of the vestments and lectern hanging from green to purple, symbolizing the change from ordinary time to penitential time. For that is what Lent is, a time to repent: to admit to ourselves and to God that we have not quite measured up to what God expects of us, but that nevertheless we can make amends and start again.

I didn't expect to see us back in church on Ash Wednesday. However, the bishop has decided we can re-open - the numbers of those contracting the virus has fallen, while those being vaccinated have risen - and so I welcome you all back. I was going to say it is great to see you again, but I see you are all wearing masks. I saw a cartoon for Valentine's Day, which showed a couple together, both wearing masks, and he said to her, "I only have eyes for you."

Ash Wednesday is usually a sombre occasion, but I can't suppress my joy at being back in church with you again. I feel for all of you have have been unable to receive the sacrament, yet here we are again, at the beginning of Lent, experiencing a mixture of emotions, knowing that God is with us in this house of peace and that he is with us in the sacrament of his body. He has also been with us in our separation from the church. If anything has kept us united, it is the Holy Spirit, who has kept us together through this long period of separation. We have come through, thanks to prayer, and the reaching out of our members, one to another, and to the determination of God to see that we are sustained and blessed while we have been in the wilderness. Lent traditionally marks the beginning of time spent in the wilderness, but we have a head start this year.

Coming to the church again is like reaching our destination. This is where we are meant to be - the place of arrival: our spiritual home. Here we can enter into a little bit of heaven, breath the good air of God's house and feel the spirit at work in us. What a liberation for us, to gather again in God's holy church of St Martha's.

Now that we are here, we need to remind ourselves of the rules for re-gathering. That means, we have to keep our distance, wear a mask, and follow the guidelines that have allowed us to re-open. We believe it is vitally important to keep to these guidelines.

We have a special liturgy for Ash Wednesday, which includes the imposition of ashes. It's usually the priest or deacon who administers the ashes, as a black smudge in the shape of a cross on your forehead, along with the words, "You are dust and to dust you

shall return. Repent and turn to Christ.” Because of Covid, the priest cannot do the imposition, so there is a bowl of ashes here on this table, and at the appointed time, I will invite those of you who want to administer the ashes to come forward and do that yourself. The way I do it is with the thumb, like this [demonstrates]. As you draw the ashes on your forehead, I will intone the words.

After this long preamble, I need to preach you a sermon. Usually, sermon writing is a work of collaboration between me and the Holy Spirit. Well, a funny thing happened yesterday as I was sitting at my desk in the library - a book fell out of the top shelf of the bookcase by itself and landed loudly on the floor. It was this book [Maybe Today by Tony Miles]. So I started reading through it, and then I found the message for today’s service. Let me read it to you:

“[The author, Tony Miles], used to visit an elderly housebound lady, who spent her days in an armchair. On one armrest was her Bible, and on the other, a newspaper. Each day she’d faithfully read the Scriptures and then pray through the paper. She longed to see a national spiritual revival and social change. There’s much she couldn’t do, but ‘I’m blessed with time to pray,’ she’d say with a smile. ‘I prayerfully sit *in the gap* between the world and heaven.’”

I love that idea of sitting “in the gap” between the world and heaven. It is an echo of what St Paul was saying in the second letter to the Corinthians, which we heard earlier: “we are treated as dying, and see—we are alive.” Our death is guaranteed by the corruptible nature of our bodily flesh. Our life is assured by our union with Christ. We are living in the gap between the world and heaven, between our life now and the promise of life to come.

And yet the life to come, which is in the kingdom of heaven, is one we can belong to now. We don’t have to wait. We enter heaven when we pray to our Father who is in heaven, and who is here with us now. We pray as those who are dying, and yet who are alive in Christ.

Perhaps that will be part of what you will do during Lent, which is to discover the thing that makes you come alive in Christ. That could be something like the housebound lady, who saw her confinement as a blessing, because it gave her the time to pray. Or it could be that what makes you come alive in Christ is to attend worship every Sunday - to faithfully come and hear the words of Scripture and to receive the holy sacrament. Or maybe what makes you come alive in Christ is to find a way to serve your neighbor - well, it may literally be your neighbor, or it may be the poor, the lonely, or those who are in need at this time.

Whenever we come alive in Christ we are entering the kingdom of heaven: a place where one day we will be fully present. But for now, we are citizens of both heaven and earth. As Christians, there is no ceiling to our sky, no limit to what we can achieve, if God asks us, and touches us with his love. On the day when we recall our mortal

nature, we also sing of the joy of God's love, a love so deep that it breaks our mortal chains and frees our spirit to ascend with the wings of an angel.

I speak from my heart, which Christ has touched with his love. My friends, how good it is to be with you today. May the love of Christ bring you alive, and bind us to God in one body. Let us walk together with the same purpose, and be of the same mind in Christ, who brings us out of death into life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford