

Mt. 6.1-6, 16-21; 2 Cor.5.20b-6.10; Joel 2.1-2, 12-17.
Ash Wednesday, 18th February 2015.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart always be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Ps.19:14).

Ash Wednesday 2015 is upon us. As we begin our preparations for Easter, we participate symbolically in Christ's wilderness experience – but this should not be seen as only a bleak time of gloom and despondency. That combative preacher, H. A. Williams, who didn't mince his words, had a unique take on thinking this way. He said,

It is a pity that we think of Lent as a time when we try to make ourselves uncomfortable in some fiddling but irritating way. And it's more than a pity, it's a tragic disaster, that we also think of it as a time to indulge in the secret and destructive pleasure of doing a good orthodox grovel to a pseudo-Lord, the Pharisee in each of us we call God and who despises the rest of what we are.

This kind of thinking, Williams said, was '*an ecclesiastical charade... a disguised self-idolatry*'. The true Lent, he says, has '*nothing to do with giving up sugar in your tea, or trying to feel it's wicked to be you.*'

Ashes are an ancient sign of penitence; from the middle ages it became the custom to begin the forty days of Lent, a reminder of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tested by Satan, by being marked in ash with the sign of the cross. The English word 'Lenten' derives from the

lengthening of days, a happy sign in my book, and it underscores an understanding of Lent as a time of spiritual growth and renewal. It is traditionally a time for self-examination, self-denial, and study. The penitential part should take the form of recognizing, with all of humanity, our tendency to deny God, to build barriers in our relationship with him, and our complicity in Christ's death.

But, as Matthew warns us, we should beware of '*practising piety*', especially if this is only for outward display – what is called for in the reading from Joel is a 're-turning' to God '*with all of the heart*'. The idea is to re-establish a right-relationship with God.

Our wrongdoing works against God, and so can suffering, ours or someone else's. The most serious consequence is alienation from God, not any punishment that the sinner may receive. Alienation is a desert experience, and when we willingly enter the desert of Lent, thinking of Jesus in the wilderness, then the wilderness belongs to us.

It's always lurking somewhere as part of our experience, sometimes and for some people, it becomes all of it, but it's *not just outside of us* as we might like to think. We shouldn't suffer the 'slings and arrows' and pretend we're just victims of 'outrageous fortune.' What we're feeling is incapacity - we are unable to participate in communion with God; we're feeling alienated from him. We might try to pretend it's something else, we might try to numb the experience, but the only thing that works is to acknowledge that our isolation is self-created.

It may be isolation from love, from feeling competent, from work. What used to delight and enliven, music, food, politics, the Bible even, has become dull and uninviting – it deadens and makes us sleepy. Not because we're lazy, but because it makes us feel even more alone.

Or perhaps we've been robbed, robbed of easy certainties, unthinking convictions, that this is black and that is white; that old so-and-so was a saint; that what I thought I could believe & trust has turned out to be false; that a good walk in the country is a cure for everything. When the fantasies I built my life upon have dissolved – what do I have left? What foundations remain? Do I just go on, day after day with my faked jollity, my forced laughter, my streaks of downright pain?

This is the true Lent, the sense of being isolated and ill-equipped, all at sea without a raft. It is, I believe, a necessary part of our human experience, and therefore it found a place in the life of the Son of Man. He is us, and driven by the Spirit, he did time in the wilderness. The story of Jesus reminds us that being thrown out in this way is part of our call to faith. To know isolation, alienation, to be incapable of communion is part of our training – perhaps because, as we may suspect, our communion has so far been shallow and we have come to see its superficiality.

Hence the feelings of loss, and where the temptations begin. Temptation to give up, to cynicism, even to cruelty. Temptation to banish from life all we hold dear, like love, to distrust and disbelieve in what we are, to deny that it is the

Spirit which bears witness to our spirit. God in us. We become like dead people, despite our repetition of the creed every Sunday where we speak of the Spirit as He who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified. We say it, but we just don't believe it. Our self-distrust conjures up demons like 'I can't do this anymore' or 'I want to die' - or we find ourselves angry at a word, a glance, a failure to show interest – or we may feel envy, malice, and become uncharitable.

'This then is our Lent, our going with Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. And we might apply to it some words from the First Epistle of St. Peter:

'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice, in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.'

1 Peter 4:12,13

Accept your wilderness. From the story of the Son of Man realise what your Lent really means, and then the angels will minister to you as they did to Him. In other words, you'll find moments when giving for love's sake really satisfies you, really makes you feel alive and in contact. And at such moments Christ's glory is revealed, and we rejoice and are glad. We look at the travail of our soul and are satisfied. Lent, we discover, is Easter in disguise.'

H. A. Williams

*Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21 Concerning Almsgiving

'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever 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 whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near— ² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?" '

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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