

Sermon Ash Wednesday 2023

This holy season of Lent we now embark upon carries with it many layers of meaning for many people. There are many associations and understandings we attach to this time. Some may look at this season of Lent with bemusement or confusion. Some may look at it with aspiration and others with aversion. Associations even of guilt, or feelings of inferiority and failure. Some may carry memories of Lent begun well but of finishing not so well. Others for whom this time is a spiritual highlight. And others for whom this is strange and new. Some approach this time more in a spirit of taking up rather than of giving up. Some see it as a time of mastery of the self, when we try to become some sort of 'super-Christian.' And for others, this is a time marked by a focus on the suffering, passion and death of Our Lord as a means to celebrate more fully his Resurrection at Easter.

So, many layers of meaning and many associations we bring to this time now before us. Yet, it is possible to distill all these meanings and associations into a single word and image. There *is* just one idea that might help us clarify what we are trying to do in this season of Lent. There is one word that can cut through many of the complex layers to restore the heart of this God-given season of grace. Mother Church today reminds us of this key idea in the scripture readings placed before us today. And the word is 'return.' The prophet Joel in the first lesson today saying, *Yet now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning.... Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love.*

Lent, then, is an invitation to return. As Joel reminds us, it is an invitation that comes directly from God: *it is the Lord who speaks.* Now, in this invitation to return there is seriousness. It is a return with fasting, with weeping and mourning. And this is because returning suggests that we have been away. In the Christian tradition we say we need to return not simply because we have been away but because we have been heading in the wrong direction. Human pride and human sinfulness taking us in a direction away from God.

The classic disciplines of Lent, then – prayer, fasting and almsgiving – the church proposes as the means to assist us in our reorientation. These disciplines help us to see the degree to how far we have wandered, and they provide us with the means to get back on track. And it is important we see them as means. They are not ends in themselves. And that too is one of the classic ‘hang-ups’ of this time, the idea that Lent is ‘about’ these practices. No. Lent is not ‘about’ prayer or fasting or almsgiving. It is not ‘about’ these disciplines. Lent is about our return to God. But the disciplines help us make that return.

The wisdom of the church also helps us to see what takes us away from God and prevents our return. The things that call us away. The things that distract us. And these have been typically identified as the ‘world, the flesh and the devil.’ The remedy for these is precisely those disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer, helping us combat the snares of the devil. Fasting, helping us combat our attachment to comforts of the flesh. Almsgiving, helping us combat our love of the world. Powerful and effective weapons to help us make our return.

Precisely because Lent is an invitation to return, it is also an invitation to honesty. When we seek to reorient ourselves back to God and to respond to his invitation, we see how far we have wandered. How readily we listened to the false promises of devil. How much we delight in pleasures of the flesh. How in love we are with comforts of the world. How much more important, then, we keep before us the promise of God who extends the invitation. The God who is *slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.*

We are God’s wayward children. But God, through this season of grace, offers us an opportunity to make our way back to him. Our aversion to this season may be that it seems so terribly negative and pessimistic. But it is not that. It is simply *realistic* about our human condition. Importantly, though, Lent does not leave us there. Lent is not simply to remind us that we are miserable sinners. Lent directs us to a promise. A promise realised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our return is to nothing less than the joys of resurrection life. Amen.