

Sermon Lent 3 Year A 2023

At the start of mass during these Sundays of Lent, we commence with the ancient rite of what is known as the *Asperges*, from the Latin ‘to sprinkle.’ It can – and more properly should be – the opening rite at the principal mass on every Sunday through the year, and in some places still is. During Eastertide, the rite changes somewhat to become known as the *Vidi Aquam*. This taken from the opening lines of the chant for the Easter season, ‘*I saw water...*’ The verse continues ‘*...flowing from the right side of the Temple.*’ It is a quote directly from Ezekiel 47, and is a vision of water flowing out from the Temple and flooding in every direction. This is, of course, an allusion to the water and blood that flowed from the side of Christ. And it speaks of the life and healing flood that covers the whole earth that Christ’s sacrifice has won for us.

We can look forward to that joyous acclamation in a few weeks’ time. But during this season of Lent, we remain with the more somber tone: *Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; Thou shalt wash me, and I shall become whiter than snow.* The Latin ‘asperges’ as I mentioned is translated as ‘sprinkle me’. But this is, in fact, a very weak translation of the Hebrew psalm text. Our English translation far more accurately captures what is meant. Not a mere sprinkling but a purging! *Thou shalt purge me!* The psalm text goes on: *wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.* Christian life involves us being cleansed, washed, purified, purged.

This is put to us in this season of Lent precisely because this is the work we are meant to be engaged in. We more intentionally allow God’s Spirit to do His work in us. During this time we actively seek to cooperate with God’s grace so to turn aside from those things which separate us from God. By disciplining the body and applying ourselves to prayer and works of mercy we endeavour to step away from those things which seek to drag us into the darkness, and which seek to keep us captive. The psalm verse which opens the *Asperges*, our sprinkling rite, is taken from Psalm 51. A great psalm of sorrow and penitence. It opens *Have mercy on me God according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.* This great psalm is traditionally ascribed to King David himself. And written in remorse for his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. This is David’s great sin. This is his blackest moment. Importantly, David’s insight is that only God can remove the stain. Only God can heal his heart. Only God can make him clean.

So, David prays: *purge me... wash me*. This is such a critical spiritual insight. We can make no progress in the life of faith until we are real about ourselves. David very easily could have played the blame game. 'Well, if only Bathsheba wasn't so beautiful and alluring. If only her husband wasn't complicating matters. If only I didn't have the power to do what I wish. I can't help it if I have no self-control. A man's got to be a man after all.' But no. David recognises that he alone is responsible for his guilt. And God alone can set him right again.

It can be hard to accept this. It can be hard to recognize that *I* am the one who needs purging, that *I* am the one who needs cleansing. In our cultural context, this is made all the more difficult. The loud cultural voices about us are constantly shouting how the problem is always 'out there'. The issue is never with us, but with the institutions, the politicians, society, 'the system'. In the church, we might say the problem is with the bishops, the hierarchy. It is all of them 'out there' that cause all the harm and damage. If we change them, if we change the world, if we disrupt and disturb what's 'out there', then everything will be fine. The endless protests that are such a feature of modern life are just a symptom of this. But even if they succeed in making a noise and raising awareness, they fail on an essential point. They fail to start with the key idea that change needs to begin with me. *Consider first the log in your own eye* some wise man once said. Our own hearts need to be converted first before we seek to convert the world. And we cannot give what we do not have.

But as David says, and as the sprinkling rite at the start of mass reminds us: *Thou shalt purge me, O Lord, with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; Thou shalt wash me, and I shall become whiter than snow.*

David's prayer should become ours. Because it is a prayer that is heard! God in Christ does cleanse us, he does wash us. And this is the mystery of Easter. Through his cross and resurrection Christ shares his victory over the forces of darkness, even those forces of darkness at work in us. And why our sprinkling rite at the start of mass is not just a reminder that *we need* washing and purging. It is also a reminder of our baptism, in which *we are* sacramentally washed and cleansed. In Christian life, we *are* both cleansed and purged. And we pray *to be* cleansed and purged. And it is growing ever more into the mystery of baptismal life, which has us share in the mystery of Christ's passion and resurrection, that makes this possible.

Journeying deeper into this mystery is part of the hard work of this holy season of Lent. And it is hard work. Not that Lent is about spiritual gymnastics or getting lost in an exaggerated introspection. But just as David had to honestly and painfully acknowledge before himself and God his grave faults, well, so do we. But because we would rather worry about other people's problems, or the trivial and temporal things in life, we oftentimes don't engage in the hard work. And we thereby miss the goodness and life God seeks to offer. The Old Testament reading today from Exodus reflects this. The people of Israel once more grumbling and complaining to Moses. They have failed to recognize the good things God has done. They were slaves, and now they are free! They had been oppressed for 400 years, and now are liberated. Yet they do not see it. They have forgotten the wonders God has worked for them. Their stubbornness and willfulness, their closed hearts and limited vision mean they cannot see the mighty hand of God at work in their lives. All they can see is their trouble. Their only concern is their material wants. And only Moses is to blame. Only God is to blame.

And so God instructs Moses, *Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the river... you must strike the rock, and water will flow from it for the people to drink.* Note, it is not scratch the rock, or tap the rock. It is *strike* the rock!! For God's grace and life to break through, our stubborn hearts and closed minds must be *struck*, must be broken open. Oftentimes we prefer to be stuck in our grumbling and our complaint, our miseries and disorders. But that is rarely a source of life and grace. They must be broken apart. But if they are, well, then life can truly flow.

Allow Christ to purge us, and we can be made clean. Allow him to strike the hardness of our hearts, they can become springs of living water. This image of living water, of course, so striking in the powerful gospel reading put to us today. 'Living water' is not a usual turn of phrase for us. The Greek here simply means 'running water'. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the giver of this 'living water', water that flows from within and which is both alive and brings life. It is through Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, by listening to her and drawing her deeper into truth, that her heart too is broken open. Through conversation she is purged, made clean. In conversing, she is converted. There is more than one way to strike a rock... And as she is led to deeper truth and insight, she can then go out and lead others to truth and insight. Hard work, yes. But allow Christ to purge us, then we will be brought to deeper truth. Allow him to strike the hardness of our hearts, then springs of living water can flow from our side. Amen.