

Lent begins



But 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. (Matthew 6 : 6)

Ash Wednesday

ASH WEDNESDAY

*burn away the overgrowth
and let the flax shoots grow through*^{1,2}

introduction

Fasting, prayer and alms-giving put us in our true relation to God and to one another. Fasting, prayer and alms-giving, undertaken with joy, are the traditional signs that we are prepared to take seriously, the Lenten part of our journey as Jesus' disciples. Today's readings mark the beginning of Lent and affirm the necessary attitudes required of us. The readings help us to actively hope, wait and anticipate. We believe a promised newness will bring all creation under God's reigning – the land, animals, the water supply and the people. All will be blessed and be a source of praise to God. The readings announce a transformed social reality. That is in sharp contrast with the present failing social reality.

first reading: **Joel 2 : 12 – 18**³

[a call to repentance and prayer]

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;(12) 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. (13) 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? (14) Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly;(15) 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.(16) 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 by-word among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"(17) Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people.(18)

The prophet Joel lived during the period when Persian influence dominated life in Judah.⁴ Joel's Israelite community had flourished and the prophet reminds them of their need to remember their special relationship with the God of their ancestors. The Israelite community had lost the awareness of their special identity as God's covenant people. Joel's community were part of a large Persian empire and the mood in

1 Maori Proverb: "*Tungia te ururua, kia tupu whakaritorito te tupu o te harakeke*"

2 Front Cover image: – Jesus teaches his disciples to pray

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

4 About 350 b.c.e

Jerusalem at the time was a mood of secure confidence in the existing political and religious arrangements. The prophet saw beyond the present, to an impending judgement and new action of God in the world.⁵ The starting point for the prophet's analysis, as always in the case with prophets, is the covenant relationship which God makes with the specially chosen ones. 'Covenant' includes the ideas of; *election*, *Torah* and *promise of land*. The covenant promises are *a free gift* but they imply mutual responsibilities. God gives commandments. The people respond by Torah-keeping. But whatever happens God remains; *faithful, slow to anger, gracious, compassionate, and repenting of evil* even in the face of unfaithfulness and brokenness from the people's side of the covenant.⁶

Joel earlier suggested a time of distress was close. His call for a new attitude focuses his expectation of a judgement coming on, '*the day of the Lord*' (vv.1-2). For the prophet it will be *a day of doom* when God will deal with Israelite and non-Israelite injustices in the same way. The '*ending*' is near. This adds an emotional and urgent tone to the prophet's announcement of the coming of '*that day*'. For Joel repentance is God's gift to avoid a total calamity. True repentance is marked by a genuine change of attitude; rather than a superficial action like tearing at one's clothes. The evil to be turned from, is the peoples' violations of covenant-keeping.

"*Rich in faithful love*"(v.13) could refer to the kindness of God's restraint in dealing with the people's lack of covenant-keeping. Or it could refer to God's constant, even excessive, fidelity to that covenant. Or it could include these elements together. Joel then instructs about the turn-around in attitude that is required. No one is excluded from this call to change. Included are even those who are normally exempt from warfare (vv.16-17).

The prophet describes the rite of assembly and how those of the priestly caste are to pray on behalf of the people. The priests' function is to remind God that the Israelites are God's property, or inheritance. If God neglects their welfare and allows their destruction, it would be viewed as *a reproach against their owner* by the other nations! The other nations would then seriously question the whereabouts and effectiveness of the Israelite's God! This reasoning suggests that the resulting abandonment would be more than political or economic ruin. It means the ending the special covenant relationship.

The words of the prophet remind those who feel secure in possession of the temple and its liturgy, that they always live in radical dependence on God, and that the Israelites only exist as a people because of God's gracious call. Joel calls the

⁵ *Jl.* 2:28-29

⁶ *Jl.* 2:13

whole Israelite community to a complete turn-about. The question for the community of listeners is, “*Will the day of the Lord be a judgement or a blessing?*” The words of the prophet remind the community that it can never allow apparent prosperity and stability to obscure its dependence on God.

That God is jealous for this people (v.18) means that God's zeal is not against a sinful people. Rather God is jealous on their behalf and it is proved in the divine characteristic – compassion. God's first response to the prayer is a sign of mercy; when the conditions of famine are reversed (v.19). The prophet's urgent summons to national repentance reminded the Israelites of the possibility of divine judgement even in their time of prosperity. But rather than focus on judgement, the dominant vision is about God's mercy and future promise. Repentance is a genuine alternative because of the very nature of God whose characteristic faithfulness to the chosen ones makes a transformed future possible. Therefore the prophet insists that the Israelites acknowledge their dependence upon God; a dependence that goes beyond lamenting one's personal or collective sins. The fact of the prophet's invitation suggests that chosen ones need time to reflect upon the experience of living in relationship to the gracious, compassionate God of the covenant.

response: Psalm 51 : 1 – 4, 10 – 12, 15 [a prayer for cleansing and pardon]

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love;
according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.(1)
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.(2)
For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.(3)
Against You, You alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so that You are justified in your sentence
and blameless when You pass judgement.(4) . . . ,
Create in me a clean heart, O God
and put a new and right spirit within me.(10)
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
and do not take Your holy spirit from me.(11)
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.(12) . . . ,
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.(15)*

The psalm is a lament; the most famous of the seven Penitential Psalms. It is a prayer for the removal of the personal and social disorders that sin has brought with it. God's purpose is for a strong covenant partner and the people's response is trust in God's reliability. With such trust a true sense of sin is possible. Sin is the quite ordinary and unspectacular. Often it is the seeking of dominance and control of affairs on one's own terms. The first hopeful step towards divine mercy, is having a true

sense of sin. Like the characters in *the Genesis account of the Fall*, or like the Israelite nation *at the time of the prophet Joel*, the psalmist's concern also concerns us. It is not finally the danger of sex, the origin of evil, the appearance of death, or the power of the Fall. Rather, the first hopeful step towards divine mercy is the call to us to be God's creatures, to live in God's world, on God's terms.

second reading: 2 Corinthians 5 : 20 – 6 : 2 [our calling to be ministers of reconciliation]

We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.(20) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.(21) . . . , As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.(6:1) 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!"(2)

Paul battles the religious leaders who have challenged his credentials and his message. The so-called, '*Palestinian prophets*' are proud of their Israelite origins and their faithfulness to their tradition of order. But Paul denounces them as hopeless.⁷ Despite the enmity that existed between Paul and some members of the Corinthian church, the focus is on reconciliation between God and people: Paul appeals to his readers. Reconciliation with God comes to those '*in Christ*' by expanding the kind of life they live after their baptism.

For Paul, an apostle is one who endures affliction but isn't crushed by it. Reconciliation isn't a human creation. In *verse 20*, the writer expresses God's activity as Creator. '*Be reconciled*' summons humans to engage themselves in that process and become ambassadors of reconciliation '*to the world*'.⁸ It is also a warning from the apostle, that as long as Christians in Corinth persist in their alienation from the apostle and his message of the crucified Christ, then their being '*in Christ*' is worthless.⁹

Throughout this section of his letter, Paul has been appealing to '*the crucified Christ*' as the true image of salvation. He insists that Christians have new standards for evaluating what is worthwhile or necessary for the good life. That new standard

7 Paul attempts to explain the meaning of God's action by a variety of different categories; his attention keeps moving rapidly back and forth from God's act to his own ministry as well. (2 Co.5:20-6:2)

8 [v.21] A statement of God's purpose, expressed in terms of sharing and exchange of attributes. As Christ became our righteousness (v.30), we become God's righteousness (cf 2 Co.5:14-15).

9 2 Co.6:1-2: '*Not to accept . . . in vain*': That is, conform to the gift of justification and new creation. The context indicates how this can be done concretely: become God's righteousness (2 Co.5:21), not live for oneself (2 Co.5:15) be reconciled with Paul (2 Co.6:11-13;7:2-3).

[v.2a] '*In an acceptable time*': Paul cites the Septuagint text of Is.49:8; the Hebrew reads, "*in a time of favour*" it is parallel to, "*on the day of salvation*."

[v.2b] '*Now*': God is bestowing favour and salvation *at this very moment*, as Paul is addressing his letter to them.

is, “*the cross by which God reconciles the world*”. Through Jesus' crucifixion, the new covenant is established. Would-be disciples are to express God's own appeal to humanity. When Corinthians respond to the author's plea for reconciliation, there is a new basis for hopeful living. They are responding to God's plea.

Paul quotes from *Isaiah*,¹⁰ as though God is speaking directly. Like the ancient prophets, Paul presents God's own claim for fidelity and obedience. The theme of a new inheritance is voiced. The present time of answering is for establishing and/or restoring the covenant basis for life. The *outcasts, the marginalised, the vulnerable* (i.e. *the crucified ones*) are given places and comforted. *The opposite to marginalisation is participation*. To be comforted is to be given a place in God's new reality.

gospel reading: Matthew 6 : 1 – 6, 16 – 18 [concerning alms-giving, prayer and fasting]

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.(1) 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.(2) But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,(3) so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.(4) 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.(5) But 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.(6)

In this section of *the Sermon on the Mount*, the duties of righteousness or piety are set out. These duties include alms-giving, prayer and fasting. Tensions between the Israelites and Christians had led to the two groups worshipping separately. Matthew, while wanting to distinguish between Israelite and Christian piety, seems determined to maintain the continuity between the traditions. So the writer formulates the sayings of Jesus in the way a rabbi would speak.

Matthew takes pains to support the continued authority of Pharisaic teaching while expressing the new teaching for the new Christian community. New-comers to the Christian community naturally asked questions about the relevance of Israelite devotional practices. The evangelist remembers Jesus' teaching and answers, “*Those who perform religious duties for human consumption are 'hypocrites' who already receive their reward! Those who act devoutly in secret have a reward coming from God!*” In classical Greek the term ‘hypocrite’ meant ‘play actor’ or one who ‘takes a

¹⁰ Is.49:8

role'. In Aramaic there is the added link of the word with '*profane person*'. Matthew uses the word about the Pharisees in the negative sense; of pretending to be pious or virtuous, without really being so.

The term, '*righteousness*' is translated as, '*uprightness*'. The reference is to the performance of religious duties. '*Alms-giving*' and '*piety*' are fuzzy terms, seldom used with precision. The evangelist suggests that focus on performing religious obligations and ceremonies prohibits outward display. He doesn't prohibit outward display. Rather, the prohibition targets unworthy motives behind the actions. Anything done to win attention or esteem from others is performed for the wrong reason. In the temple there were six trumpet-shaped receptacles for depositing alms. At one time trumpets may have been sounded to call attention to major gifts. The warning, "*not to sound any trumpets*" is probably a figure of speech to make that point. A giver's motive could be to witness to God's generosity, modelling a response of thanksgiving for other believers. This and other practices may be worthy. But a giver's motive could be to, "*make a big show of it*" – evoking pride in the giver and guilt in the observer. Such methods are inappropriate. The author calls for what is humanly impossible; but spiritually preferable: "*Do not let your left hand know what your right hand does*".¹¹

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.(16) But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,(17) so 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."(18)

Fasting is commendable in Lent if the devotion is both hidden and joyous (vv.16-17).¹² Jesus told his disciples not to fast while he was with them. True repentance (like alms-giving and prayer) is a joyful anticipation of *the reigning of God*. The social dimension of fasting is an identification with those here and around the world who go hungry to bed. If money saved on food is donated to feed the poor and the homeless, so much the better. It would be wrong to focus on the religious actions rather than on the motivation for doing them and on God before whom they are done.

11 When Matthew treated Jesus' sayings about prayer (vv.5-6), there existed the devotional practice of community prayer in the temple alongside the practice of private prayer. Fixed times of prayer had developed by the time Matthew was writing and were observed by turning to face the temple in Jerusalem. Prayers were said aloud only during public fasts; otherwise they were whispered. Matthew recommends withdrawing completely from public view for prayer; that is, to the privacy in the small storage room attached to a house. Devotion to God is not for public consumption.

12 [v.16] The only fast prescribed in the *Mosaic law* was that of *the Day of Atonement* (Lv.16:31), but the practice of regular fasting was common in later Judaism; cf. *The Didache* & Mt.9:1.

Hypocritical Israelite and Christian religious practices stand equally condemned by these teachings. Perhaps Matthew's own community was guilty of hypocrisy. For an Israelite-Christian group struggling with its identity, Matthew's summary of Jesus's teaching assures that there is a higher righteousness that doesn't need credit for works of piety and can ignore personal acclaim. To insecure Christians struggling to discover who they are, this teaching in Jesus' words reassures Matthew's community that they're acceptable, apart from what they can achieve, or in fact do achieve, by their own effort.

for sharing: ¹³

- *A call to repentance and prayer: **Comment on Joel 2 : 12 - 18***
- *Our calling to be ministers of reconciliation. **Comment on 2 Corinthians 5 : 20 - 6 : 2***
- *Concerning alms-giving, prayer and fasting: **Comment on Matthew 6 : 1 – 6, 16 – 18***

prayer: ¹⁴

*Gracious and merciful God,
 You look with love upon a sinful people
 and desire only their return to You.
 We beg of you the grace to live this holy season,
 to persevere in prayer, fasting, and alms-giving.
 By the discipline of Lent purify our hearts of all pretension,
 bring us back to You, and make the whole Church ready
 to celebrate the mysteries of Easter.
 Grant this through Christ, our liberator from sin. Amen.*

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13 *Lectio Divina*: is a Latin term for 'reading with God'. It had its origin in monastic life, but anyone can use it. *Lectio divina* is a way of praying using the Scriptures. If practised consistently, it gently leads us into a deeper relationship with Christ as we open ourselves to him. The practice requires a quiet space, a short passage of Scripture and a willingness to give time to the project.

There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This booklet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. (Mt.18:20).

14 The prayer that concludes the *Lectio Divina* is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.