

Ash Wednesday 2018

Today's readings offer us powerful ideas which we are called to explore in order to allow our transformation during this Lenten Season – the yearly opportunity to journey with the Lord in his passage through pain, suffering and death, leading ultimately to the Day of Resurrection – an event so momentous that it transforms our very understanding of not just humanity but of creation itself.

In our first reading we hear the powerful appeal of the prophet Joel to the people of Israel as they await in fear as a mighty host of locusts approaches the land threatening to devour all in their pathway. Joel proclaims: *'Thus says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.'* This great call to return to the Lord *'with all your heart,'* is one to the very core of who we are - our thoughts and feelings, the way we make our decisions, our choices and actions – all to be examined as part of a return to the knowledge of the gift of God's Love made to each of us through Jesus Christ.

In a pretty topsy-turvy dysfunctional world, is this possible? There are so many distractions – some of which are the result of modern technology. Can we really wrench our minds from such things and focus on God? Is it possible? The answer is 'yes' because if we open ourselves to the unfailing mercy of God – a Love beyond understanding - then, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we CAN journey in faith.

However, this return to God can only become a reality in our lives when the grace of God penetrates and moves our innermost being - the gift of the movement of the Holy Spirit within which gives the Love that 'rends the heart'. Joel proclaims the words from God: *'Rend your hearts and not your clothing,'* and this is a powerful call which should resonate with every aspect of the way we live our lives, and indeed in which we interact with and in society.

From the child-abuse scandals which have beset the Church and many other organisations throughout the world, the shameful dealings we hear of concerning corporate and individual greed, the continual seeking of self-gratification and obsession – in these and other areas, Christians are called to be signs of the Lord's power to convert, renew and transform society. In fact, as we see, Joel's call is not just one for the individual, but one to the whole community: *'Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 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. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.'* This reminds us of our common life as brothers and sisters of Christ – as the Body of Christ. Thus, we do not journey alone, but with our brothers and sister in Christ.

But it is also a call for us that we have a responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to **all** we meet. This may seem a less attractive part of our faith journey – are we really to challenge other people's behaviour when we ourselves are so flawed? And yet we believe that the gift of Repentance – of turning to God – leads to contentment and fulfilment in life no matter what is thrown at us. This will always be a lifelong journey for all who take it up.

You may find yourselves thinking at this point that all of this seems far removed from other words I may have uttered about the Lenten journey. Could I say that I absolutely do believe that Lent should be a positive experience for Christians. It is the annual chance to walk with Christ on the way of the Cross, and thus into the dawning splendour of the eternal Day inaugurated in the Easter garden. So, yes, it is a **springtime** for the soul- a desire to seek to grow spiritually into the likeness of Christ –transfigured through journeying with him – ultimately to strengthen our knowledge of the call to live Resurrection lives.

Lent is not an ordeal or endurance test – Lenten discipline should allow us to greater knowledge of God’s love for each of us revealed in our Lord and Saviour so that at Easter we welcome and receive our Lord – risen from the dead; that we know his power, energy and beauty more deeply through the humility of our changed hearts.

The Gospel we have heard this evening is rarely heard in church, and it contains many resonances which might make us feel uncomfortable. The idea of marital infidelity, of power-games by religious leaders, of morality and patriarchy. The account is believed to be an addition to John’s Gospel and was probably a much loved one circulating among Christian circles, but which never made it into the earlier Gospels. Yet the action of Jesus seems to me to give us a clear understanding of the Divine nature – one of great love, coupled with a wondrous forgiveness no matter what in the face of true repentance. I love the idea that the scribes and Pharisees slink away shame-faced when their own lives are illuminated by Jesus when he says, *‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’* That precious moment when the woman stands before the Word made Flesh alone and he says: *‘Where are they? Has no one condemned you?’* and she answers *‘No one, sir,’* leading Jesus to said, *‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’* These are words to us – from the one who travels to Calvary for each of us to lead us to lives of Resurrection.

Shortly, those who wish will receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads in ash. The words which accompany this are stark. **Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. Repent and believe the Gospel.** These words remind us of the ground of our being, of our humanity – our rootedness and place in creation. And yet our understanding of humanity and of ourselves is transformed through faith - by the knowledge of the Good News of Jesus Christ, whose love for each of us surpasses our understanding of the word *Love* itself, leading us on our own journey into the Divine Love. In seeking transformation, we participate in the very life of Jesus himself. As we approach the solemn and beautiful sign of the imposition of ashes, may we also journey towards this transformation in the knowledge of his saving grace – a grace revealed as he gives himself for the life of the world.

Amen

Joel 2

2 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

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,^[a] 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.

John 8: 1-10

8 ¹ Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people

came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman

who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, 'Teacher, this

woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone

such women. Now what do you say?' ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to

bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on

questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the

first to throw a stone at her.' ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.^[a] ⁹ When they

heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman

standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one

condemned you?' ¹¹ She said, 'No one, sir.'^[b] And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and

from now on do not sin again.'



Christ as the Man of Sorrows – Style of Jan Mostaert – National Gallery, London