

Tuesday Before Ash Wednesday

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday which makes today a perfect time to ready ourselves for beginning this most sacred season in the whole Church year.

Lent is composed of two parts as signaled by the contrasting gospel readings in our Lectionary. Part one is from Ash Wednesday to the end of week 3. The Scriptures are from the synoptic gospels, echoing the optional words for administering ashes tomorrow: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." The gospel readings focus on the teachings of Jesus, on how we are to behave and on what we are to do.

Part two is from the 4th week until Holy Thursday and there is a sudden shift to the gospel of John. It is as though the Church knows that by the beginning of the 4th week of Lent, we will have totally messed up on our Lenten promises. In trying to imitate Jesus our performance is pretty spotty.

So like AA, we are brought half way thru Lent to confess: "We can't but God can." We simply have not done well in following Jesus the teacher, and so our Scripture readings helpfully plunge us into the good news of Christ as savior. John's message is no longer about what we should do, for we have failed mightily at that. Instead, we are to give up and then, in amazement, receive Christ's underserved gift of forgiveness. The whole scene has become different, for no longer are we trying to earn God's love. Instead, we encounter the transforming fact that in Jesus Christ, God already loves us! We are gifted with more than we could have hoped.

So half way through Lent we are to undergo a conversion, for yet another time, as our gospel readings shift from ethics to Christology, from Jesus the teacher to the Lamb slain from the foundations of the earth.

So today's Scriptures are preparing us for Lent, but does so with a surprisingly heavy threat. What we are given is a terrible portrait of what happens when God regrets that He has ever created us. Can you imagine anything more terrible? He washes His hands of us--no more; I've had it with you! This is so much so that God decides to start all over again, with only one pair of each species and Noah's tiny family. Now while we might feel hopeful that when this is all over, God gives us the rainbow as promise that He will never again wipe out humanity. But listen carefully to what God doesn't say: He doesn't say that He might not permit us to destroy ourselves.

For several decades a Doomsday Group of experts considers the odds that we might obliterate civilization, measuring the implications of such things as climate change, expanding wars, likelihood of nuclear disasters by intent or by accident, contamination of our water supplies, poisoning of air, contamination of soil, energy depletion, the growing inequality of rich and poor, unchecked population growth with insufficient food.

Recently, doing their measuring, this group concluded that in 2015 we are three minutes from midnight on the edge of destroying the world as we know it! Suddenly the story of Noah becomes very relevant. So we reach for help with today's Gospel from Mark. What we find are the disciples, this time in a boat, and once again they have forgotten to bring anything to eat. As Jesus asks them to remember what happened when, previously, they had only five loaves and were told to feed 5,000 persons. "Don't you understand," He exclaims: "It is about trusting." But given the plight of

today's world, what is it that we are to trust? As did Noah, and as did Israel during their tragic Babylonian Captivity, we are to trust that God is calling forth a faithful remnant, if necessary, to begin again.

I would like to believe that Assumption Abbey is such a remnant. Only a year ago, we were Noah's threatened, tiny family. We met in our classroom as the rains began, and we prayed together that the Spirit would ignite our imaginations so that we could together discern if God willed for us to be an ark able to weather the flood of precariousness. And although we were gifted with nineteen possibilities, it was not until we reached the eighteenth one that the dove came with a leaf promising a new beginning. We are to be a remnant, and this is to be our first Lent in which we no longer need worry about the past, but are being opened to undergo rebirth into a new future.

So let these beginning weeks of Lent be a period of compunction, of having our pride punctured in the midst of our joy, remembering how profoundly we are being gifted by God not by our own doings but by God's incredible grace. Tomorrow we will be reminded that we are dust, or put another way, that we are precarious, but precarious dust that is being resurrected into a new body of Christ.

Pagans used to look in amazement at the early Church and exclaim, "My, how those Christians love each other." So may it be said of us, "My, how those monks love each other," for they are transcending each other's shortcomings, their different cultures and diets, their contrasting languages and ages, sharing each other's joy and sorrows and speaking the truth in love. So may we follow our beloved Superior in saying, "Thanks be to God."

W. Paul Jones

17 February 2015