



GOOD LORD, DELIVER US

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on Ash Wednesday, February 6, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6: 10; and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

Today is not only the beginning of Lent, but the beginning of what is sometimes called the Paschal cycle, or the Easter cycle, which includes the seasons of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, concluding at Pentecost. At the heart of these events and at the heart of the gospel itself is the mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and our participation in that mystery. From today, Ash Wednesday, until the Day of Pentecost, the theme of our worship is the salvation of the human race through the mighty acts of Jesus Christ. In its celebration we become participants in those mighty acts and enter into the risen life of Christ.

Ash Wednesday and all of the other observances ahead of us take their meaning from the Great Vigil of Easter. Although each occasion of fasting or feasting marks an occasion in this cycle, and each has its own purpose, there is an underlying unity. All of the special days in this cycle, and all celebrations of baptism and eucharist throughout the year, are rooted in the central celebration of the Great Vigil.

In earliest times, the weeks preceding Holy Week and Easter were devoted to the preparation of catechumens, the converts who would be baptized at the Great Vigil. Until the time of their baptism, catechumens were permitted to be seated in the back of the nave, for the ministry of the Word, and were then excused at the peace. They met with elders and sponsors to reflect on the readings of the day, and they engaged in prayer, worship, and acts of ministry, reflecting on their experience. Then, on Ash Wednesday, they were formally enrolled for study. This forty-day period of intense preparation came to be known as Quadragesima, and it was marked by penitence, fasting and instruction. In time, the whole congregation entered into this practice to provide support to the catechumens, to join them in the spiritual journey that leads to Easter, and to renew their own repentance and faith in preparation for the renewal of their own baptismal vows at the Great Vigil. Today we call that forty-day period, in which we all participate, the season of Lent. It originated in the baptismal preparation of catechumens.

In addition to the enrollment of catechumens, Ash Wednesday was also marked by the admission of public penitents to their penitential discipline, so that they might be ready to be readmitted to communion for the Great Vigil. They were permitted to be seated in front of the catechumens, but in back of the congregation. They were excluded from communion and committed to a severe course of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. They were segregated from the rest of the congregation, and were required to wear special robes, and to crop their hair. Eventually, some of these penitential exercises were adopted by the congregation as a whole, giving Ash Wednesday its customary character as a day of atonement, fasting and penitence.

What we do on this day has its roots in the Hebrew scriptures, where covering oneself with sackcloth and ashes was a sign of repentance and mourning. This was the practice of early Christians as well. In ancient Israel, ashes served as a forceful reminder of sin and death. They represented all that was burned out or wasted, of that which once was but is no more. It serves as a muted trumpet, alerting us to the coming passion and death of our Lord. The readings for this day are ominous, and intentionally so.

The reading from Joel is appointed to remind us that we are powerless, and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves except to repent and open ourselves to the intervening mercy of God. The psalmist provides us with a model of someone who knows how deeply the relationship with God has been shattered and who casts himself or herself on the grace of God. Paul, acutely aware of the dark power of sin and mortality, takes pains to point out to the Corinthians and to us that it is God who has taken the initiative to set things right in sending Jesus Christ to heal that breach, in this moment and every moment. Now is the day of salvation.

And then there is Matthew. On this day, the very day we mark ourselves with ashes, Matthew warns us about parading our acts of piety. It is hard to miss the irony. At a deeper level, however, Matthew brings us good news on this sober occasion. He doesn't tell us how the faithful will receive their reward, but he tells us what it will be. If we turn our lives to God's purposes, God will overlook our shortcomings and failures. God will respond to us in mercy

Desmond Tutu, head of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, writes, "Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing."

The message of Ash Wednesday is that we stand before God as sinners doomed to die, and it is only through God's merciful efforts that we can hope for anything.

Sometimes we may be unaware of how great a grip sin has in our lives. We think we have everything under control until we try a little self-discipline or self-denial. The moment we say "no," we discover there is another voice within us saying "yes."

We're like the soldier who cried out to his commanding officer, "I have taken a prisoner!" The officer shouted back, "Great! Bring him on in." "He won't come," complained the soldier. "Well, then, come on in yourself," the irritated officer replied. "I can't. He won't let me." (Homileticsonline.com, source unknown.)

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "In the fall of 1999, over 250 church leaders, criminal justice employees, politicians and service providers gathered at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., for the first national conference on restorative justice. Criminal justice traditionally asks, 'Who did it? What law did he break? How are we going to punish him?' Restorative justice asks, 'What harm was done? What is needed to repair the harm? Who is responsible for repairing it?'

"Penance is the acceptance of responsibility for repair, and it is one of the most healing things a repentant sinner can do, as well as one of the most painful. While it may look like our own work, I do not think it is. Like the wake-up call to confession and the pardon that is offered, penance, too, is God's gift." (Speaking of Sin (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), 94-95.)