

Welcome to Lent.

I don't know about you, but every time Ash Wednesday rolls around, I feel as if the color has gone out of the world. Epiphany light and brightness, like the glittery greens, yellows and golds of last night's Mardi Gras beads have been replaced by the grit of ashes, and the purple of bruises. We have entered a gloomy gray landscape.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. Ashes mark our way into a season of self-reflection and intentionality. It is time to change our focus. The Light that has come into the world moves from the outside to the inside, in preparation for its Easter return. The one who transforms the world and is continually renewing creation prepares to do so again by first transforming and renewing our hearts. In Lent, we move from ash to ash, as our prayer, fasting and self-giving brings the light of Christ to reduce to ash the stone which surrounds our hearts, and to transform them into the fleshy, compassionate heart of God.

We see this shift in focus in Matthew, where Jesus redirects our attention from what we do on the outside, to what God is doing on the inside. When

you pray, do not be like the hypocrites—and by the way, in Aramaic, the word we translate as hypocrites means actors--so, don't be like actors on a stage, going through the motions of prayer for outside spectators. When you fast, do not do so in a way that shows your discomfort to the world, and when you give alms, don't do so in a way that solicits public approbation. Do these things, instead, in secret—on the inside. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. I'll come back to that idea of reward in a few minutes.

But first, notice that Jesus says “When” you pray and “When” you fast and “When” you give alms. He does not say “If.” Prayer and fasting and almsgiving are assumed to be part a life of faith, from the time of Moses right up to Jesus' own time. In fact, the Hebrew word for almsgiving is the same word as the word for righteousness. Giving alms is part of what observant Jews did as part and parcel of a life of faith. Jesus was not prescribing some new practice or piety, or some new way of being in the world.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are part and parcel of *Christian* piety as well. Jesus is not really inviting us to try something new this Lent. He is,

however, inviting us to pay attention to why we are doing these things, and who we are doing them for. Lent is not about proclaiming our Christian commitments to the world, nor, really, is it about caring for the needs world, although surely those in need should and do benefit from our almsgiving. Nor, finally, is our prayer, fasting and almsgiving for *God*. It is for us. It is about allowing the practice of our Christian commitments to transform and redeem us. The purpose of our Lenten practices is to assimilate us into the very life and heart of God.

The reading from Isaiah shows a failed assimilation. Israel's piety has apparently remained only external, it has not transformed them. Isaiah shows us a God mightily disappointed in Israel because their piety seems not to have carried over as compassion for their society at all. God says to them, you make a great show of fasting and appearing to humble yourselves, but still you oppress your laborers, and the poor among you go hungry. You say the words of prayer, but there are homeless on your doorstep. Somehow the prayers and fasting of Israel have not done the job of softening their hearts, of fashioning in them new hearts—the hearts of God.

God says: this is the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.

The purpose of our Lenten disciplines is to prepare us to look upon the world with God's eyes, and to respond with God's compassion. This, I think, is the reward that Jesus promises in Matthew 6. If we give God access to our hearts through our prayers, self-denial and giving, and we will be rewarded by having our hearts transformed..

Ah, but beware that reward, brothers and sisters. When we exchange our human hearts for the heart of God, it is a transformation of ashes and bruises and blood.

If we truly give ourselves over to coming into God's presence in prayer, if we read scripture and allow it to sink into our very pores and bone marrow, if we give of our time and talent to those in need, in such a way that we discover their humanity, along with ours, then we will be left broken-hearted. Having the stone broken from around our hearts is a painful

process, and it leaves us with a raw, throbbing, aching organ where once our self contained piety kept us guarded and safe.

This Lenten business is scary stuff, because it implies that we will never be the same again. We will not be able to look at need and brokenness in the world and not respond. We will not be able to witness injustice and not feel pain, we will not be able to feast without feeling another's hunger, and we will never be able to encounter a stranger without seeing in him or her the face of God.

This journey we embark on today, marked by ashes and dust is none other than the way that leads to the very cross that is drawn on our foreheads. We are marked with that cross in baptism, we reclaim that identity today and we are drawn ever closer to the cruciform life of God. We begin our march toward Good Friday, and the one who is broken for us.

Welcome to Lent. Dare to become the brokenhearted people of God.

AMEN

Ash Wednesday sermon, February 21, 2007, Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, MD

Preached by the Rev. Nancy Burton Dilliplane