

Ash Wednesday St. Michaels

John 8 v 1- 11

Ash Wednesday, down the ages, has been a day of fasting and contrition, and sets the tone for the forty days which are to follow; days of penitence, abstinence, and prayer.

As Lent begins we are called to examine ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to show us those things in our lives which separate us from God and bring those things to the foot of the cross.

The words of introduction to the Common Worship Ash Wednesday Liturgy (which we used at the beginning of this service) remind us that penitence and fasting are the traditional way in which the church down the ages has prepared for our Lord's Passion. It says "by carefully keeping these days, Christian's take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.

It goes on to invite us in the name of the church to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self denial; and by reading and meditation on God's word."

But what about the first part of this introduction, which refers to the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness.

In our Gospel today the Scribes and the Pharisees confronted Jesus with a woman who was caught in the very act of breaking one of the Ten Commandments. These laws given by God through Moses during the Hebrew people's wilderness wanderings became the rules which governed their communal lives As time went on the laws set out in these Ten Commandments Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not murder etc. were expanded so that by the time of Jesus there were 613 laws which a good Jew was expected to keep. One law, for example, forbade boiling a calf in its mother's milk. Observant Jews today still take care not to mix meat and milk. Another directs a Jew to make a parapet for his roof to avoid someone falling over, and another not to decide a case on the evidence of a single witness.

To keep all 613 laws which had emerged was a colossal task which it was virtually impossible to adhere to.

The woman's accusers were legal experts zealous and self-righteous baying for punishment. Jesus stops them in their tracks He doesn't tell them not to punish the woman - he simply challenges them to examine their own lives and judge whether they were completely sinless. Not one of them was able to say they had never done any wrong and they, one by one, slipped away. Only when all the accusers had slink off does Jesus confront the woman.

First He draws the woman's attention to the fact that not one of these self righteous men remained to convict her. And then pronounce "neither do I condemn you"

But this was not a simple dismissal of her wrong doing.

Jesus didn't say the sin didn't matter His justice does not condone the sin even though in his mercy he forgives the sinner. For the woman there both a command and a challenge

"Go and sin no more"

It is a mistake to interpret this story as though sin is unimportant since forgiveness doesn't operate in a moral vacuum.

There is still right and wrong and the sin is not to be glossed over.

Beasley Murray¹ says "To receive the Lord's mercy means living henceforth for the Lord's glory. 'Mercy from God calls for life unto God'"

And here's the challenge. Give up the old ways and take on a new and better way of living.

For most of us the idea of giving up something for Lent is a challenge in itself. First there is the challenge to decide what to give up. Then there is the challenge of keeping up the discipline for 6 long weeks.

But perhaps the greatest challenge of all is trying to focus not on the item we are depriving our selves of, but on God, so that through the 40 days of discipline and self denial we grow spiritually.

As we begin lent and move towards Christ's passion and crucifixion we need to remember again that the price for sin was paid once for all at Calvary: the sin, of the woman in our Gospel story and for our sin.

Sin is something we prefer not to talk about and probably not think about either.

Each time we come to a communion service and most other services as well we say words of confession asking for forgiveness for the things we have done wrong and receive absolution (the reassurance of God's forgiveness) but how carefully do we think about what we have done wrong. The ways in which we have marred God's image in us, the things we have thought or said or done which have harmed our relationship with our fellow human beings and with God.

One Ash Wednesday, a priest challenged the congregation to take a piece of paper and write on it one thing for which they needed God's forgiveness. Each slip of paper was then brought up to the chancel steps, placed in a large ceramic bowl and set fire to. The ashes were then used to anoint the penitents. I don't propose we do this today but just ask you to bare that story in mind as you come to the altar to receive the ashes on your forehead.

As Lent begins we are called to examine our selves and allow the Holy Spirit to show us those things in our lives which separate us from God; which mar his image in us; which prevent us from becoming more like him, and growing deeper into his love. Tonight we are each called to turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ .

¹ The Message of John - Bruce Milne © Inter – Varsity Press 1993