

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday – a day of obligatory fasting and the day on which we start our Lent fast. In the gospel we are given instructions by our Lord on how we should conduct our fast. He says in Matthew 6 v16-18: ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ Yet amazingly what does the Church do? It disfigures your face with ash! Many the person who has come to church in the morning and then gone on to work or the shops only to be told, ‘Excuse me, you have a black smudge on your forehead.’”

There are many apparent contradictions in our journey of faith. There are many biblical injunctions like the one Jesus gave today about fasting, which we just cannot carry out literally. Take Paul’s command in 1Thess 5:17; “Pray without ceasing’ how can we pray without ceasing because we would simply not be able to do anything else including eat or sleep. There is a story of a Russian man who was concerned over this issue and because he was unattached he set off with only a bible and some dried bread in his knapsack to visit monasteries and holy places throughout Russia to ask this question. And so it came to pass that he learnt to pray without ceasing by using the ‘Jesus Prayer’ – *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy upon me* or more simply *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me*.

Reciting this with his outgoing breath thousands of time a day he reached a state where the prayer flowed on in an uninterrupted stream, as though it had its own energy. It had become the prayer of the heart, and through it he had an abiding awareness of the presence of Jesus and his grace.

I must admit I wonder at the monotony of this way of praying. One short sentence endlessly repeated, and its thoughts restricted to a sinner’s plea for compassion! It seems oppressive to me that this poor man’s way of praying to our great and glorious God should be purely a breast beating exercise in self-pity. But it has precedent in countless religious communities where the psalm for today, Psalm 51 is recited daily at each of the seven hours of prayer. The thoughts of this psalm are not quite so restricted and its expression is more varied but it is essentially a plea for God’s mercy from one whose is profoundly aware of being a sinner.

Perhaps this is why Ps51 is so appropriate for Ash Wednesday and the penitential season of Lent. Perhaps that is also why I, a sinner, love this psalm. It could also be because of the famous musical setting of this psalm by Giorgio Allegri is divinely beautiful.

This psalm, according to the heading found in the bible versions says, *A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba* Whether this was really written by David after this famous occasion is of some doubt but David must have been filled with remorse for a terrible sin he committed by contriving the death of a faithful supporter in order to conceal his own adultery with that man’s wife Bathsheba. This psalm can be adapted for anyone troubled by a particular wrong doing.

Once again the Season of Lent seems an appropriate time for us to explore this psalm. [Read v1-3] O to be so washed, to have one’s heart made new, to be comforted and guided by God’s spirit! O to be close to the Lord again. But sincere penitence the Lord will not reject [Read v17]

Yes this psalm is brilliant for use when we are dealing with a particular wrongdoing we might have done. But why has the church recommended it for regular repetition? Is it that the Church wants its adherents to be groveling constantly before God thus making them more controllable?

There are verse in this psalm that indicate to us that we must realize that we do not sin only on occasions but that we are sinful in our very nature. [Read verse 5] I know of a certain lady of another parish who refuses to say this line because she says when her mother

conceived her it certainly was not in sin. Perhaps the NRSV translation is better; *Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

So we have an inherent fault of sinfulness yet this psalm also lights up the character of God in a way that fills us with hope. For the prayer rests on the abundance of God's compassion, God's mother-like pity and tenderness, his persevering love. The psalm leads us to call on this pity and love to help and save us. [Read v10&11]

Now often when we meet people who are great breast beaters, they seem all consumed by self – **their** guilt, **their** sin and hopefully **their** forgiveness. But in this Psalm the speaker looks forward to guiding others to learn of God and return to God. Especially in the last few verses which we do not use on Ash Wednesday [Read v13] But he then goes even further and wider – [Read v18].

So as we begin Lent we might find it too hard to "pray unceasingly" because we do have to continue to live our lives but perhaps a daily recitation of Ps 51 would be a good way for us to confess our unworthiness; to express our trust in the Lord's forgiving love and salvation for ourselves – yes – but also God's Church and for God's world.

Let us pray

Be gracious to me, Lord, in your faithful love. In your overflowing compassion blot out my offences. For I constantly tend to do wrong. My sinfulness is ever before me. Create in me a pure heart. Do not take away from me your Holy Spirit. Do good to your Zion, your church. Let her use this Lent to build her in your strength and blessing, till all people offer themselves in thankfulness to live to you alone, our Saviour, abundant in tender pity and enduring love. Lord Jesus Christ, now and always be gracious to me a sinner.