

Wed 22nd February 2012 Cathedral, Grahamstown 6 p.m.		Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-18	Ps 51:1-12	2 Cor 5:17-6:2
		Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18
NEW BEGINNINGS		

It is so good to gather together for Ash Wednesday. What is the background to what we are doing tonight? After Jesus was baptised, he went into the wilderness for 40 days, where he fasted, he prayed, he was tempted, he was amongst the wild animals; he faced the demons. He prepared for the ministry and the challenges that lay in front of him. In the same way, these 40 days of Lent are our time in the wilderness. During Lent, we face our own demons and temptations. We prepare for the challenges and struggles that lie ahead. Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent, the 40 day journey that leads us to Easter and the celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

1st POINT – Ash Wednesday and Lent

Lent is our time of inward, private, spiritual preparation for the battles, the tests that lie ahead for us. It's a time to face up to who we are, where we are going, whether we are still on track. It's a time to face our broken-ness, whether as individuals or as a community. Here in church, we mark Lent with outward signs and symbols: the colour purple, for sorrow and mourning; the ashes on our foreheads; no flowers until Easter; the Ten Commandments which we repeat each Sunday. But we need to mark Lent inwardly as well.

One of the greatest boxers of all time, Muhammad Ali, has just turned 70. During his heyday as a boxer, he was renowned for his skill, his strength, and his fighting style, which he described as “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” No-one could beat him, no-one could stand up to him during his years as World Heavyweight Champion. Behind a successful boxer, behind the public victories and triumphs in the ring, are thousands of hours of preparation: boxing workouts, drills,

fitness training. We as the public don't see that. All we see is the fight itself. But the fight is won or lost in the hidden work, the private preparation in the weeks and months beforehand.

Lent is our time for the hidden work, the private, spiritual preparation for the public struggles. It is a retreat in daily life. We stay here, and go about our normal everyday commitments – family, school, university, work, social life. But at the same time we are on an inward journey, as we face our demons, as we are tested and tempted, as we prepare for all that lie in front of us; as we say to God, “Here I am, Lord. Start the work of healing and transformation in me. Let this be a time of new beginnings.”

One of the most profound. Life-changing experiences we can have is when we open our hearts and lives to God; when we turn to God in repentance and faith and trust; when we believe the good news of God's love.

It is easy to point fingers at what is wrong around us. Corruption. Dishonesty. Poverty. The destruction of the environment. The abuse of women and children. Lives and families destroyed by drugs, alcohol. The tragic state of public school education here in the Eastern Cape. The attacks on Christians in Nigeria by Boko Haram. Poor service delivery. Uncaring officials. The alleged assault, by members of the SAPS, on Ayanda Kota. Deep divisions in the life of the Anglican Communion. Despair over leadership and power struggles. The diocese of Umzimvubu. The sadness surrounding Dean Lubabalo Ngewu's death, with so much unresolved. Our heartache over the church that has so much potential, but at times is so broken, so damaged, unable to heal itself and live the good news of the love of God.

We are all called to moral and spiritual renewal, to prayer and fasting as we face these tragic and wrong things around us.

But if we are to make a difference, we need to start with ourselves. On Ash Wednesday, and in Lent, we come to God for ourselves. Change begins with you and me. It is our own hearts and lives that we look at tonight. We come so that God will touch us, transform us, renew us.

2nd POINT – Our readings

The call of God: Joel 2:12-13

“Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me wholeheartedly [with all your heart], with fasting, with weeping, with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments [change your life, not just your clothes], and turn back to the Lord your God....”

The call of God that comes to us every Ash Wednesday: the call to turn back to God, to start again, to choose the road that leads to life.

Our answer to this call: Ps 51:10

“Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (51:10).

It is personal - “create in *me* a clean heart” – as we face some home truths, as we look at ourselves in the mirror, as we take an honest look at our lives, as we own up to uncomfortable things and harsh realities.

As we repent, as we turn from all that is wrong, we choose the road that leads to life. We long for more of God in our life. We long to be possessed by God’s love. We ask to love God more. We ask that we may hunger and thirst for God.

The reminder of what we are in Christ: 2 Corinthians 5:17

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

The three-fold pattern for Lent, of give, pray, fast - Matt 6

Give – it helps us look beyond ourselves to others; it helps to free us from our dependence on material goods. *Pray* – we focus our attention on God, we rest in God’s presence, we listen for God’s voice, we bring all that we are to God. A time to bring prayer into our daily lives. *Fast* – it helps clear out the clutter in our lives. We may choose to give up certain food or drink, or eat less; some will say no to alcohol or caffeine, or tobacco; we may fast from certain luxuries. We fast so that we may be physically and spiritually purified and cleansed and strengthened.

3rd POINT – Repent – turn from sin

And we repent. We turn from all that is wrong. Perhaps we need to face the damage and hurt that we have caused. Perhaps we need to acknowledge our destructive behaviour. Perhaps we need to stop blaming others for what has gone wrong, and ask what part we have played in it all.

Here on Ash Wednesday, we stand at a cross-road. We face a choice. What do we want to take into the future, into the months ahead? Do we want to take our anger, our bitterness, our resentments, our past hurts? Do we want to continue to carry this baggage with us? Do we want these things to continue to poison our interactions, to guide our decisions and our responses? Do we want to do that? Or do we want to take into the future our forgiveness, our healed hurts, our compassion, our love, our wisdom that comes from having brought all our baggage and heartache to the foot of the cross? Let’s allow ourselves to be wonderfully embraced with the love of God.

CONCLUSION

“Here I am, Lord. Begin the work of healing and transformation with me. Through me bring healing to a broken world. But begin with me.”