

<b>Wed 13<sup>th</sup> February 2013 Cathedral, Grahamstown 6 p.m.</b>		<b>Ash Wednesday</b>
Joel 2:12-18	Ps 51:1-12	2 Cor 5:17-6:2
		Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18
<b>NEW BEGINNINGS</b>		

We remember Anene Booysen, and all victims of these brutal rapes and murders that are happening. We pray for their families.

“Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me with all your heart...” (Joel 2:12f)

Words calling us to repent, to turn back to God – the words that are not words of condemnation, but of hope, light, a new beginning, the love and mercy of God.

### **1<sup>st</sup> POINT – Ash Wednesday and Lent**

Today is Ash Wednesday. It marks the start of the season of Lent, the 40 days between now and Easter, the journey that leads us to Easter and the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. 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. Why do we do this?

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 is our time in the wilderness. During Lent, we face our own demons and temptations. We prepare for the challenges and struggles that lie ahead. We face our issues of

power, leadership, control, authority. We listen for the voice of God. This is our time of inward, spiritual preparation for ministry.

The news has been full recently of the struggles and the successes of Bafana Bafana, and our cricketers. We remember the medals, the successes of last year's Olympics. Chad le Cleur. Will we ever forget the sight of Chad's parents, seen on TV, weeping as they watched their son take the gold medal?

But behind the victories, the gold medals, lie hours and hours, years of dedication, hard work, preparation. Long before the team steps onto the pitch, long before the swimmers get into the Olympic pool, is the effort and training which we don't see. The hidden work.

Lent is our time for the hidden work, the spiritual training for what awaits us, as we say to God, "Here I am, Lord. Do your work of healing and transformation in me. Let this be a time of new beginnings in my life as I give myself to you."

## **2<sup>nd</sup> 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 come back to the Lord your God...."

"Let your broken heart show your sorrow; tearing your clothes is not enough." (GNB)

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 take an honest look at ourselves, as we own up to uncomfortable things and harsh realities.

### **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!”

“Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone; the new has come.” (GNB)

We are *not* trapped, stuck in old patterns, old ways of doing things.

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

The three spiritual disciplines that help us overcome the three great temptations of money, sex and power - wealth, power, bodily appetites.

*Give* – it helps us look beyond ourselves to others; it helps to free us from our dependence on material goods. We give to overcome the temptation of wealth.

*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. We pray so that we may overcome the temptation of power.

*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, to caffeine, to chocolate, to cigarettes, or even to facebook; we may fast from certain luxuries. Junk food. TV. We fast so that we may be physically and spiritually purified and cleansed and strengthened. We fast to overcome the temptation of our bodily appetites.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> 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.

As we repent, 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 recognise in our longings and searchings and restlessness an underlying longing for God, for the living water, for God's love and strength to fill us and to guide us, for God to be with us.

There is much that is wrong, all around us. Corruption. Dishonesty. Poverty. The Marikana massacre, the farm strikes at De Doorns. The manipulation of people's hopes and despair by the powerful. The abuse of women and children. Our dream nation which is now being called the rape capital of the world. Lives and families destroyed by drugs, alcohol. Antagonism and hostility here in Grahamstown over service delivery, the Grahamstown name change debate, the use of our resources. Deep suspicion and distrust over how power is being used or abused.

And sadly distrust and damage and brokenness even in the life of the church. The three great temptations of money, sex and power play themselves out here also. Relationships that are deeply damaged, almost beyond repair. Our heartache over the body of Christ, the church.

Possibly one of the biggest challenges we face as a nation today, is our use of power. How power is used will make or break our communities, our schools, our church, our country, in the time ahead. I encourage us, this Lent, to reflect and pray deeply on how we use power.

If we are to make a difference at any level, we need to start with ourselves. Change begins with you and me. We come so that God will touch us, transform us, renew us.

## **CONCLUSION**

“Yet even now, says the Lord, turn back to me with all your heart...” (Joel 2:12f)

Let today be a day of new beginnings. Let this Lent be the time when we journey into the wilderness, the desert and drought that may be our daily reality – and ask God to meet us and to sustain us.

A new walk with the Lord. A fresh start. Turning to God in repentance, trust, hope. Listening for the voice of God. New beginnings.

“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.”