

Ash Wednesday 2024

Meta

Date: February 14, 2024

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103 or 103:8-14

II Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Opening

This life is a magnificent gift. Every new morning, every hour, every moment we draw breath; “our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life,” all of it is pure gift. And who is the Giver? We hear the answer from St James, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”¹

What is it all for, all the abundant gifts we received from the Father—our bodies, our souls, the hours, the days, the years entrusted to us? Is it not that we find our greatest joy in worship—offering ourselves completely to the Lord—all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? Isn't this life—this magnificent gift—given that we might devote our lives to serve our great God and our neighbors, not ourselves?

I'm less than three minutes into this Ash Wednesday homily and I've already preached beyond myself. It's an open secret—preachers preach the faith they're pursuing themselves. Who among us though could give an unequivocal 'yes' to these questions? Yes, I offered myself entirely to the Lord; his worship is my highest ambition. Yes, each new day that is God's gift to me I have renounced myself that I might serve God and my neighbor. Who among us can say 'yes' to these questions?

These are Lenten questions. Ash Wednesday begins the season of radical self-honesty. This liturgy won't allow us to live in delusion. When you receive ashes on your forehead; when you hear the priest address you with the words, 'Remember that you are dust, to dust you shall return,' you know that you've entered a season to examine ultimate questions. You've been given life and breath, a magnificent gift. And one day you will draw your last breath, as will I. He who faces these ultimate questions with humility need not fear that final day. She who examines her soul and offers her heart to Christ anew need not be haunted on that final day by regrets that she held back her heart, her soul, her very life.

¹ James 1.17

There is no greater calling than that which St. Paul announced to the Corinthian Christians, ‘We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.’ Where your attention and priorities have been scattered; where ambition has led you astray; where your mind has been distracted; where your heart has been divided, come home. Be reconciled to God.

Our Life an Offering

Life is too precious and too short to squander these gifts in vain pursuits. Your life and mine will be an offering, one way or another. The question is: to whom will you offer your life and the gifts given you? You and I will make sacrifices, one way or another. The question is: to what (God help us) or to whom? Will you make offerings and sacrifices to the only God worthy of our worship—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Or will lesser idols receive the sacrifices of your time, your finances, your very heart on their altars?

It’s time to look within and examine those questions.

And when we look within, when each of us inevitably see that we have made sacrifices, we have offered our lives to things that are passing away; things that don’t really matter; things that increase my self-love; that I’ve built my life to be always comfortable and convenient for my needs; one then asks—how do I begin again?

There can only be one answer —the cross of Jesus Christ. It’s an answer that won’t make sense to the world, but it’s the wisdom of God. Take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The Lamb of God came to offer his body, his mind, his soul as a total sacrifice to the Father that we might be saved; and not only that we might be saved from our sins, but that we might offer and present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable to Him.²

This was the earnest desire of St. Paul for the church he pastored at Corinth, ‘We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.’ Paul himself had been delivered by the grace of God. Paul was offering his life to persecute the church of Jesus Christ. But after Paul was baptized into Jesus Christ, Paul patterned his life after the Lamb of God. ‘I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’³

What Paul commended to the Corinthians—do not receive the grace of God in vain—he showed by imitating the Lamb of God, by taking up his cross to follow Jesus. Here’s what Paul did with the gift of this life, and the greatest gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ:

as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we

² Romans 12.1-2

³ Galatians 2.20

live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

The holy Word of God, the awesome Word of God, thanks be to God. And the words of a man who took the gift of grace and poured himself as a living sacrifice. How else could one honestly say, 'I have nothing, yet possess everything?'

We need holy examples like St. Paul in our pursuit of holiness, to orient us on the right path. Though we don't have the same calling as St. Paul; though we may not know a fraction of what he suffered for the Gospel, the heart of the calling remains the same—let us not receive the grace of God in vain.

A Holy Lent

And that brings us to the practices of Lent. How then do Lenten sacrifices work? Those classic disciplines we emphasize in this season—prayer, fasting, Scripture, confession, and almsgiving. It's really quite simple—they train us to bring all the gifts we have received in this life and convert them into worship—worship of the the one true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They lead you to offer your life for Christ, to love and serve your neighbor as he commanded us. That's the goal of Lenten disciplines.

However you take up the disciplines of this Lenten season, remember this goal. These disciplines are not checklists or fitness plans or diet plans for personal enrichment. Jesus taught long ago that we can take holy things and make them about ourselves. If God brings personal benefit through spiritual disciplines, that's his kindness and his grace. But that's not our pursuit. We are seeking to become like the Lamb of God who took up his cross, who loved us and gave his life for us.

Conclusion

This life is a magnificent gift. And Lent teaches us what to do with this life, with all the gifts God has given. Let Ash Wednesday and let these 40 days begin with purpose and intention, but also begin modestly. Do not try to cram a lifetime calling into these next 40 days. Simply pray that you can make a good beginning, not only for this Lent, but for the rest of your days—for however many years God has given you in this life.

When you think of pursuing Christ this Lent and beyond, think of the land. What does soil need for its own health and the health of the plants it nourishes? Soil needs steady, gentle, regular rains. When soil has suffered a lack of rain; when the ground is dry and hardened, heavy, sudden rains—downpours—don't reach the depths. Flash floods happen. Your soul doesn't need a flash flood of spiritual effort. We need steady, regular, gentle disciplines to nourish our soul with grace. So that our souls make us into a living sacrifice for God.

I have no illusions that God's workmanship of my soul will be complete by Easter Sunday. No, Lent trains us for that day that remains in the hidden counsels of God—the day we draw our final breath.

There was a saying among ancient Christians when a brother or sister died. Christians would say, 'He has been perfected. She has been perfected.' In the mystery of God, all our spiritual efforts will be taken up into God, but it will be grace of God alone that will perfect us. That is true now and it will be true on our dying day. And so I offer to you the wisdom of St. Paisios the Athonite to make a good beginning this Lent: 'Go and do what you can, and God will do for you what you cannot do for yourself.' Lead us, Lord, to make that good beginning today that we may glorify you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, both now and unto ages of ages. Amen.