



Why Lent?

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February 17, 2010 – Ash Wednesday

Our lesson this evening from the Book of Joel takes us back to the time not long after the Jews had left their exile in Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. The people were going through the “religious motions,” but they weren’t committed to God the way they should have been. Through Joel, God calls his people, when it comes to their sins, to rend their hearts, not their garments. He reminds us that it’s easy to say you’re sorry. It’s easy to make an outward show of penance. It’s easy to go through the motions. It’s not so easy to actually *be* sorry—to actually *be* repentant.

I remember sitting in traffic court one afternoon and watching as the judge called down person after person. He asked each one why he or she was there. This wasn’t the court where people contested their traffic tickets. To get to this one you already had to have admitted your guilt. It was just an opportunity to explain your circumstances. And so each person went and stood in front of the judge and basically said the same thing: “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to speed, or blow through the stop sign, or turn without signaling.” And I knew the judge was just sitting there thinking to himself, “Yeah, right. I bet you’re sorry. Not!” I kind of felt sorry for him when I realized that he had to sit through this every week. Those people weren’t sorry they had been speeding and blowing through stop signs. They were sorry *they got caught doing it!*

Even we Christians are like that. We’ve been forgiven by God because we have put our faith and trust in Jesus as our Saviour. We aren’t murderers or adulterers or thieves. We basically think of ourselves as “good people.” And yet I don’t think we stop very often to think why we don’t kill people or commit adultery or rob banks. The fact is that we’re all sinners. We all continue in our sins every day. But the sins we still commit – and often hold dear – are the ones we can get away with, the ones no one but we ourselves ever know about.

There are people we can’t stand and that we, dare I say, “hate.” Other times we let our gaze linger lustfully. We may not rob banks, but we rob our employers coming in late or going home early and we rob God when we keep our time, talent, and treasure for ourselves. We haven’t kill the guy we don’t like, not so much because we love God and want to please him, but because we know that murder lands us in prison and we don’t want to suffer those consequences. We haven’t committed adultery because that would tear our family apart and we don’t want to live with those consequences. So instead we indulge our eyes and leave it at that. We don’t do the big stuff, but we daily indulge ourselves in the “little sins” that we can hide or that have what we think of as minor consequences we can live with.

St. John, in his first epistles tells us to make it our aim *not* to sin. And yet if we’re honest with ourselves, I think we’ll find that a lot of the time our *real* aim is not to sin *very much*. But imagine a soldier going into battle, knowing that the enemy is going to be shooting at him, and making his aim not to get shot *very much*.

We hold onto the sins we like while we come to church each Sunday and sing about how much we love God. Brothers and sisters, we’re very often just as guilty of “going through the motions” as the ancient Jews were. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we’re basically “good people.” Friends, it’s extremely dangerous to fall into that spiritual trap, because good people don’t need a Saviour. Good people don’t need to be reconciled to God. Good people trust in their own good works to earn God’s favour. People who think they’re good have no real concept of just how costly the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross truly was. Ultimately, people who think their “good” end up in hell, having spent a lifetime deceiving themselves.

If we want to have life, we need to hope and trust in Christ. Scripture tells us, “Although we have sinned, yet have we an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins. For he was wounded for our offences, and smitten for our wickedness.”

Jesus was the one and only “good man” who ever lived. His perfect goodness allowed him to sacrifice himself for our sake. He was good where we are evil. All we need to do is put our faith in his

sacrifice made for us. But that means we have to admit that we’re sinners. It’s also true that Scripture tells us the evidence of our faith in him is a changed life – a desire to be good as he is good. A desire not to get caught when we sin doesn’t cut it. A desire to avoid the “biggies” while holding fast to our little peccadilloes isn’t evidence of our faith either. Again, John said, “make it your aim not to sin. Period. We won’t ever be fully successful at it this side of eternity, but it still needs to be our aim. It’s what we do as we’re motivated by gratitude to God for giving his only Son for our sakes. St. John says:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:3-6)

Lent comes around each year in the Church’s calendar to remind us that we need to take time—hopefully more than once a year—to examine our lives and to deal with the sin we find there. It’s a time to ask the Holy Spirit to hold the eyepiece of his spiritual microscope up to our eyes and show us our own lives—to show us the places where we’re falling short. It’s a time to repent of what he shows us and deal with that sin so that we can then ask him to show us the next dark corner of our soul that needs to be swept clean of sin. It’s an ongoing and never-ending process, but it’s a process that gives evidence of our life in Christ and it’s a process that brings us closer to his likeness and that brings the Church, the bride of Christ, ever closer to that day when Jesus, the bridegroom, will perfect her and present her, pure and spotless, to his Father.

As we prayed in the collect, God hates nothing that he has made and forgives the sins of all those who are penitent. Come before him and let him make in you a new creation—let your merciful God restore and renew you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.