

Ash Wednesday, 5 March 2025

Coventry Cathedral

Canon Nitano Muller

Holy God,
On this day of ashes,
turn our hearts to the mystery of Your mercy
 and strip away all pretense.
Speak to us in the silence,
that we may hear Your truth.
Shape us in the dust,
that we may bear Your image.
In the name of Christ, who walked the wilderness road.
Amen.

Ash Wednesday has a particular set of Scripture readings that vary only slightly from one year to the next. Many of those traditional Ash Wednesday readings call us to repentance and announce the beginning of a fast, a time of drawing close to God through prayer and discipline. Among this year's options included:

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. (Joel 2:12)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. (Psalm 51:10, 12)

When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret ... and when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. (Matthew 6:6, 17)

The question I carried throughout my preparation for today was, "Lord, what does your people need to hear afresh, today?"

People are exhausted, afraid, anxious, on a personal and global level.

You can hear how there is an attention to personal spirituality and individual relationship with God in these typical Ash Wednesday texts. And we're used to approaching Ash Wednesday as individuals, focused on finding that one-on-one connection to the Holy.

That's when I discovered the Isaiah 58 option.

Ash Wednesday ticks all my introverted boxes because it invites me into a place of self isolation and reflection. Which is good but is not the end goal.

In surprising contrast, the reading from Isaiah 58 almost scorns the rituals spiritual navel-gazing. Whereas, Ash Wednesday, is usually our day for bowed heads and renewed dedication to spiritual growth and humble prayers to God, Isaiah 58 challenges our Ash Wednesday tradition and, instead, incites us to abandon our fasts and our prayers and to set down the ashes & the oil ... and to go out to feed the hungry, and to challenge the chains of injustice, and to provide shelter for wanderers, and to repair relationships with loved ones. Imagine, if we were to heed God's instructions here in Isaiah, what a very different Ash Wednesday tradition we would have!

Please do not misunderstand me, there is a place for personal piety, reflection and development of Lenten practices. These practices are not in and of themselves the end goal.

The people in Isaiah, and all of us, who are accustomed to approaching God through fasting and praying and worshiping and confessing and bowing down, struggle with this dismissal of our sacred traditions (58:3). We want to ask, "What's wrong? Why are you rejecting our rituals, God? How come our traditions aren't good enough for you? Why haven't you come close to us during our fasts and listened to our prayers and noticed how deep our faith in you is?"

And God, like a classic break-up speech, replies: "It's not you it's me."

There's an upset pulled on us in Isaiah 58 as God challenges our focus on rituals and prayers, and it plays out like a break-up speech. God says, "I've changed my mind about what I want and what I need in this relationship. You wooed me with your beautiful worship, and I loved how you loved me but then I saw that while you were loving me, you were abusing your workers, and

you were dismissive of your family members who came to you in need. And the more I saw this, the uglier your worship looked to me.”

“I soaked it up when you sang psalms of praise, until I listened closely to the words, and I realized that you were singing thanks only for the blessings in your own life. And when I heard the good and heart-felt words of your prayers, I also saw you kneeling in prayer next to someone without a coat, and as you prayed to me with your head bowed, you never even noticed your neighbour’s need.”

“While you were fasting through prayer, my heart was warmed to know that you were thinking about me so strongly and that you were striving to be intimate and close to me. But now I have opened my eyes to see that the food you were avoiding during your fast has gone to waste; you haven’t even fed the widow or the orphan. And now I see that your desire to be intimate with me has excluded those around you, so I’m breaking up with you. I’ve changed what I want in this relationship.” “It’s not you it’s me.”

I’ve changed my mind. How beautifully you pray is not what makes this relationship. How well you fast, how strongly you love me is not enough. It’s not about you loving me in fact, it’s not about *you* at all!”

In a complete reversal of our Ash Wednesday and Lenten traditions of individual contemplation and personal penitence, God through Isaiah reminds us that even today — this holy day of setting our spirits for Lent — even today, *it’s not about us*. Even on Ash Wednesday, as we approach God seeking a moment of connection, our spirits are not called only to faith-based self-focus, but to the humble remembrance that God isn’t only in a relationship with you or with me: God has God’s sights set on ***all*** people and on ***all of creation***. God has a passionate love for justice to those who are the least of these, and an all-consuming grace for the healing of the oceans & forests and the ceasing of wars and the relief from the strains that pull us apart from one another.

The very opposite of what one US political leader said in an interview very recently in his description of Christianity, involved caring for self-first, then others.

Even on Ash Wednesday, it's not about you it's not about me it's not about preparing to spend the season of Lent calling out "*Watch me now, God!*" or "*Love me best, God!*" or trying to soak up all the Spirit and spirituality for ourselves. With the wisdom from Isaiah, it's about turning our ritualized navel-gazing outward to see the whole community; what we do over these next 40 days; in fact, all we do when we gather for worship *in here* in general is meant to inform and adequately prepare us for a life of witness *out there*. It's about looking up and recognizing a whole world of every living thing; it's seeing beyond ourselves and finding ourselves to be just one blade of grass in a field full of grass — beautifully, wonderfully made, but not alone.

The tension between our readings from Isaiah 58 and our Gospel Reading from Matthew 6 is like the relationship between a departing lover jilting another lover. But maybe, just *maybe*, God does step back from us (just a step!) and challenges us to seek the Holy and to seek our healing and to find our reassurance not so much in the ashes or in the palms or in the cross or in the empty tomb only, but in the person right next to us, and in the person in need, and in the struggles for justice, and in the dirt & ashes of life.

Which makes Ash Wednesday perhaps the hardest day of Lent, because we've come longing for connection with God *and God points us elsewhere*. Part of the reason why I think this service should take place facing the West Screen, the ruins and the people that will walk by as we sing and pray.

Through our Ash Wednesday liturgy, God deflects our affection, even, in order to point us beyond the one-on-one spiritual relationship and beyond the rituals of church, in order to call us to draw closer to humanity. Call us to take these dusty ashes as a reminder to live gently with one another; call us to be springs of refreshment for one another; call us to light up a corner of the world as we can...

...and to do so as long as we are graced with breath and with life. **Amen**