

LENT

The season of Lent is a season of penitence or fasting preceding Easter. It is traditionally forty days in length, symbolic of the time spent by Moses on Mount Sinai, the forty years' wanderings in the wilderness, the forty days' temptation of Jesus or his forty hours in the tomb. It is a period set aside in the Church for personal examination, contrition, repentance and spiritual formation. Unlike other seasons of the Christian Year, the six Sundays in Lent do not observe the fast. Therefore, the designation is "Sundays *in* Lent", rather than "Sundays *of* Lent".

Observance of a penitential fast as the Church approaches Good Friday has been a part of the liturgy of the church for almost its entire history. The first mention of such a fast was by Irenaeus (c. 130-200). And the Canons of Nicaea (c. 325) that came out of that historic meeting that created the primary creedal statements of the church stipulate a period of Lent, consisting of the forty days before Easter. Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) wrote to the church that Lent should not only be observed in the worship of the Church but by every believer, "so that we, who through the past year have lived too much for ourselves, should mortify ourselves to our Creator through abstinence."¹

During the early centuries, observance of the fast was very strict. Only one meal a day was permitted (and that, near the end of the day), and meat, fish, eggs, milk and cheese all had to be "given up for Lent". By the ninth century, these restrictions began to be relaxed. By the 18th century, fasting had moved away from a strict emphasis on food and toward the "fasting" of other elements of life, such as abstaining from festivities, avoiding marriage feasts, almsgiving and concentrating upon spiritual disciplines. The emphasis on fasting as a way of preparing ourselves for the agony of our Lord continues to today, with the traditions of using the season of Lent to institute a discipline (e.g., going on a diet, exercising daily, etc.) or in giving up some choice food (like chocolate, sweets, etc.) for Lent.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday (see below), which is forty days before Easter. It continues through Holy Week, and concludes with the Saturday before Easter (technically, at noontime). Holy Week, which begins with Palm Sunday and continues through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, is both the conclusion and apex of Lent, a time for intensive commemoration of the sufferings and death of Jesus. This final intensive preparation of penitence is accomplished in anticipation of Easter Day and the inauguration of the season of Eastertide. The traditional color of Lent is purple (the color of penitence), and Good Friday is black to designate mourning.

Ash Wednesday

The Opening of Lent

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; II Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

As far back as the eighth century, Christians would commemorate the beginning of Lent by the imposition of ashes as a token of mourning and penitence. This imposition of ashes was also accompanied by the wearing of old, ragged and often-filthy clothing. The ashes were poured over the heads of the clergy and laity alike (thus the term, "repenting in sackcloth and ashes").

¹Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1945), p. 92.

Gradually, over the centuries, the observance became more genteel, with the sign of the cross being made with ashes upon one's forehead. But whether on the forehead or covering the person, the ashes are meant to convey both mourning and penitence.

Ash Wednesday continues as a rite of the church generally observed by Christendom. Even as recent as 1929, the observance of Ash Wednesday was made a special fast-day of the Episcopal Church (USA) and named a "Greater Feast" by the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) to be observed by all. Most liturgically centered denominations still make it an important day both for Christian penance and for the inauguration of Lent, and it is today observed throughout the Christian world.

True to the primary theme of Lent, the scriptures in the Cycle B Lectionary for Ash Wednesday all deal with our repentance and penitence as essential to God working his sovereign will among God's people and in our lives.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. The message of the second chapter of Joel cannot be understood except through placing the prophecy into its context. But what is that context and who was Joel? The prophecy of Joel has no internal indicators of who Joel was (except that he was "the son of Pethuel" 1:1), and he is not mentioned as a prophet in any of Israel's pre-exilic or post-exilic literature. All that we know of him, including the date and context of his prophesy, we must deduce from the content of the book that bears his name.

He likely lived in Jerusalem (given his frequent references to that city). He was not a priest (1:9, 13; 2:17), but he was keenly familiar with the functions of Temple worship (1:9, 13, 14; 2:14-17; 3:1, 6, 16). Joel quotes Exodus 34:6-7, Amos 1:2 and Isaiah 13. In Joel 3:10, he intentionally reverses the image for world peace used by the prophets Isaiah (2:2-4) and Micah (4:1-4), knowing that the reader would immediately recognize what he had done to these far better-known prophecies. He refers to the vision of a holy city with a life-giving stream used in Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Zechariah 14:8. Therefore, he would have to be post-dated after all these books were written.

Further, Joel refers to a functioning cult in Jerusalem, sees Judah and Israel as a single entity rather than two distinct nations, refers to Israel having formerly been in exile, knows that a new wall encloses Jerusalem, and refers to the Greeks as enemies but doesn't mention Assyria and Babylon. Therefore, it can logically be concluded that Joel was likely written no earlier than 445 BCE (the year that Nehemiah completed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem), and no later than 334 BCE, when Alexander invaded Persia.

Why is it helpful to know when the book of Joel was written? Simply because the central message of Joel is the coming of the "Day of the Lord". In Jewish lore, the "Day of the Lord" was perceived as a day of victory for and vindication of Israel, when Israel's enemies would be overthrown and Israel made great before the world. But like the prophets Amos and Jeremiah before him, Joel proclaimed that the Day of the Lord would be no victory for Israel, but rather a day of judgment and darkness against them.

After the Israelite exiles had returned from Babylonian captivity to the Promised Land under the aegis of the Persian king, Cyrus, many had believed that the Day of the Lord would soon come. But instead of working together to build a shalom community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and dynamic relationship with God, the Israelites became steadily more insulated, isolated and xenophobic. By the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, they had rebuilt the Temple but their life together as God's people was in a shambles.

A contemporary of Nehemiah, the prophet Malachi described most graphically the spiritual and physical corruption of the people. The nation was experiencing both significant political oppression and economic depression (Malachi 3:10-11). Adultery, perjury, intermarriage between pagans and Israelites and victimization of the poor were all being widely practiced by the Jews (3:5; 2:10-12). Most of all, even though the Temple had been rebuilt and formal Yahweh worship had resumed, the people had abandoned their religious heritage (Mal. 1:14; 2:13; 3:7-14). They believed God had abandoned them. And therefore, they had chosen to abandon God! It was therefore in this context of such faithlessness and refusal to follow the covenant that had previously brought economic, political and spiritual stability to Israel, that Joel wrote his prophecy.

“The Day of the Lord is coming, it is near”, Joel announced to the hopeful Jews (Joel 2:1b). But that day is not to be a day of triumph and victory. Rather it is to be “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (2:2a)! Blow the *shofar*, alerting the city to its imminent danger. For God's army, vast and powerful, will descend upon them like a plague of locusts, blackening the sky with their numbers (2:2b). “Their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come” (2:2c). Thus, the day toward which Israel had looked forward as their day of liberation and salvation will actually be a day of destruction and judgment. God will bring judgment upon God's covenant community because they have been disobedient in having not been faithful to God and his call to them to work for his shalom community of justice, sharing of wealth and commitment to God. They had learned nothing from their exile in Babylon or their captivity under the Persians. They are even now as sinful as they were when they were rulers in their own land before the exile.

But Israel need not end its days in destruction and judgment. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him” (2:13-14a)? A window of opportunity still exists. Even as God's great army gathers for the invasion, the people of God can repent and return to God. And if they repent, God will hear and save both them and their land.

Repentance is the second key theme of the prophecy of Joel. Thus, the prophet sounds a call to penitence given to all of God's people (2:15-17). This repentance must be total – not just a renewal of liturgical observances or returning to the Temple to embrace its rituals. Rather, there must be a genuine embrace of God “with all your heart” (2:12, 13) that leads to a change of priorities and a concentration on working for God's kingdom. If Israel repents, not only by penitence and deep sorrow, but by demonstrating that penitence through doing justice, caring for and loving each other, and being humble before God (cf. Micah 6:8), then God will hear from heaven and will heal them and their land!

Psalm 51:1-17 is one of the Psalter’s finest penitential psalms. Its first two verses set its theme:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin”.

The writer acknowledges his sinfulness – both the evil he has done and his very inheritance of original sin that has led to his total inability to right himself (vss. 3-5). But he calls on God to both forgive him and to cleanse him of his sin (vss. 6-9), for it is God alone who can bring about the psalmist’s escape from his own sinful nature. What the psalmist wants from God is most eloquently stated:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (vss. 10-12).

Thus far, the Psalmist has been offering a prayer for cleansing from sin and pardon by God. Now, in the remainder of the psalm (vss. 13-19), the Psalmist shifts its focus to concentrate upon the consequence of his receiving forgiveness and in confessing his sins. A person who feels forgiven, who is contrite and who indeed has been cleansed of his sin by God will be a person who will:

- ? “teach transgressors your ways” (vs. 13);
- ? “sing aloud of your deliverance” (vs. 14);
- ? “declare your praise” (vs. 15); and
- ? “have a broken and contrite heart” (vs. 17).

Further, the result of such a response to God’s forgiving grace will be that the quality of public life will be transformed, for the forgiven person will “do good to Zion in your good pleasure (and will) rebuild the walls of Jerusalem” (vs. 18).

It is particularly notable that in this psalm, its author takes a strong stand against perceiving authentic faith as being the obedience of liturgies and the conducting of rituals (in this case, sacrificing burnt offerings). Such acts do not make a person holy nor present an honest expression of faith. Only a “broken and contrite heart” lived out in acting justly in the public arena will do that.

“You have no delight in sacrifice. If I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (vss. 16-17).

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. Jesus begins this portion of his Sermon on the Mount by presenting the primary point he wishes to make. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be

seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (6:1). He then presents three ways that piety is publicly displayed within the Judaism of his time: almsgiving to those in need (6:2-4), making a display of praying in public (6:5-15) and fasting (6:16-18). In each case, such practicing of piety is in reality an ostentatious display, designed to garner praise for the person for his piety. But there is no genuine compassion for the poor or sincere longing for relationship with God in such actions.

What does not immediately communicate to today’s reader regarding this passage (but would have been abundantly clear to Jesus’ contemporaries listening to this sermon) was the practice of patronage or beneficence in the ancient Roman and Jewish worlds². Public works, such as the construction of theaters, monuments or public baths, or the holding of a citywide festival, feast or games were not undertaken by the state. Wealthy individuals would assume responsibility for the building or conducting of the same, would receive permission from the local governing body to do so and, upon the work’s completion, would be declared a “benefactor” of the city and accorded public recognition by that city’s citizenry and governing body in a public ceremony. If the benefaction were a major public work, the praise given by the city would be extreme.³

Thus, the gladiatorial contests and competitions held in the Coliseum in Rome were not events paid for by the Roman Empire but by the emperor himself out of his personal wealth (which was why he and his entourage was given such choice seating, received the chants of the people of “Caesar, Caesar, Caesar”, and had the ultimate authority to decide whether a combatant would live or die).

Benefaction would also be practiced toward individuals. There were three levels of such benefaction. There were client-patron relationships, in which a wealthy person would maintain a long-term benefaction relationship with a person below his station, providing him with a predictable stream of income, goods or foodstuffs. In return, the client would perform services for his patron, normally proclaiming before him as he walked through the streets the generosity of his benefaction, writing poems or essays about his generosity or even awakening him each morning with a hymn to his benefaction.⁴ The second level of individual benefaction was the support of widows. Widows selected by the benefactor (normally those without a family to both support and protect them) would be given a monthly amount of money upon which they were to live; in essence, the benefactor had become their protector. Again, this continuing generosity was to be proclaimed throughout the streets.⁵ The final level of individual benefaction was toward beggars and the homeless needy in the streets or on the roads. This level of benefaction consisted of the occasional and haphazard contribution of funds, entailing no continuing supporting relationship. The beggar, receiving the gift, was expected to proclaim loudly to all within hearing the generosity of his benefactor.

² For a fascinating study of beneficence in the ancient Roman world and the exercise of the same by wealthy Christians to further the mission of the church rather than their own personal promotion, see the magisterial study, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* by Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-79.

Thus, in both the Roman and Jewish worlds of Jesus' time, the state did not pay for public works, festivals or social services for the poor. These were all paid by wealthy patrons and benefactors (including even the Roman emperor), and each person who gave his money for that purpose expected appropriate recognition and praise (even adoration) for doing so.

When Jesus taught, "Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do" (6:2) or "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, standing and praying in the synagogues and street corners" (6:5) and "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites" (6:16), what he was doing was not making simple commentary about being modest in your spiritual practices. What Jesus was doing was striking at the very heart of the Roman and Jewish practice of benefaction. He was calling Israel back to its Old Testament roots, reminding them that it is the responsibility of the entire shalom community of God's people to "seek the welfare of its city" (Jer. 29:7), to be committed to its public life, to build its festivities around the worship of God (not the shedding of blood for sport's sake), and to care long-term for the widow, the orphan and the poor within its midst (Deut. 15:4-5).

Thus, true disciples of Yahweh are not those who give alms to gain public respect, but those who quietly, compassionately and genuinely meet each other's needs and the needs of their society. True disciples are not those who pray in order to gain public approval but those who seek a genuinely deeper walk with God. True disciples are not those who fast and practice spiritual disciplines as a means of self-display, but those who accompany fasting with prayer and working for justice (cf. Isa. 58:3-14). It is the *hypocrites*⁶ who claim to have a relationship with God and to be in support of the Law and its call to build the shalom community but who in reality are only self-serving and even self-deceived, undermining God's very intent in building a society that truly embraces God's shalom!

Which, Jesus asks, do you choose to be? Are you going to be like these hypocrites that occupy the seats of authority and power in Israel's religious, political and economic world, but appear to be God-fearers? Or will you choose to be an authentic disciple of Christ's. Thus, Jesus concludes, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:19-21).

II Corinthians 5:20b—6:10. In this passage, Paul entreats the Corinthian Church to be reconciled to God. Supposedly, they are already Christians. But he calls them "to accept the grace of God" (6:1), for "now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation" (6:2b). Thus, Paul suggests here that, although the Corinthian Christians have begun the process of salvation by initially responding to God's grace as manifested to them through Jesus Christ, the division and acrimony which seems at the very heart and root of their church is a denial of all they claim about their embrace of salvation. So embrace all that there is of salvation, Paul instructs, for God through Christ has acted to embrace you. See all that I have gone through for you, Paul testifies

⁶ The Greek word translated "hypocrite" means "play-actor" – that is one who plays a role, rather than authentically being that role.

(6:4-10) in order to call upon you to fully embrace Christ. So embrace Him – and in that embracing, embrace each other!

Thus, in the spirit of Ash Wednesday and of Lent, Paul is also calling upon the Corinthian Christians to repent of their conflict with each other, to be penitent about their treatment and even demonizing of each other, and to embrace the fullness of salvation in Christ. The apostle does this by a masterfully crafted statement that summarizes the essence of the gospel message. “Be reconciled to God,” he writes. “For our sake he made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:20b-21).

Through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, Paul states here, God did two things. First, “he made Christ to be sin”. Second, “in him we might become the righteousness of God”. What Paul presents here is that God assigned the responsibility of our sin to Christ, so that he died in our place, taking upon himself the full brunt of our sinfulness (Isa. 53:6; I Pet. 2:24). Second, in that death, God transferred Christ’s righteousness to us. Thus, in his death, Christ became like us so that we might become in life like him!

God has been doing and continues to do that work within each one of us, Paul declares, and the manifestation that God’s work is working in us is our increasing receptivity to and embrace of the gospel! Thus, as God’s salvific work continues to occur in us, our moral character begins to change. We become more cognizant of our sin, more sensitive to the pain our attitudes and actions create in others, more penitent in our will and behavior, more desirous of building the peace, unity and purity of the church, more committed to working for justice in the world. In other words, the Spirit is doing a work within each of us and all of us collectively. Thus it is that our very penitence as a Christian and as part of the people of God makes us ever more receptive to the salvific work God is doing both in us and through us as we work for the transformation of the world into God’s shalom community. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21).

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