

A Time Of Preparation
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012

I.

Today is a solemn and significant day in the church. We enter in silence and prepare ourselves to be reverential. Later in the service we will receive ashes in recognition of our mortality, and recite a Litany of Penitence that is unlike any confession we make at any other time.

It is not a time to celebrate. There are no Ash Wednesday parties. No one goes to the drugstore to buy Ash Wednesday cards. You don't see Ash Wednesday sales in the malls. Celebration comes later, at Easter, but for now and for the next forty days we are called to examine our lives. And in my mind it is forty-six days because I believe Sundays still count.

We search ourselves for those things that separate us from God. We ask ourselves whether the things we do during the week are consistent with the things we say in church on Sunday. And we try to recognize where the world's ways have taken priority over God's ways.

II.

The reading we heard from Matthew's Gospel is where we always start. It has been our reading every Ash Wednesday since the Episcopal Church was founded in 1789. It has been used every Ash Wednesday in the Church of England since the first Book of Common Prayer was written in 1549. And it was read when the practice of Lent began in the ancient early church.

The first half of the first sentence of today's reading explains why it is so appropriate for this day. Let me read it again. Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." That summarizes his basic point. The rest of the reading consists of examples.

Jesus was describing certain hypocritical practices of the Pharisees, local religious leaders who made big productions of their prayers, almsgiving, and fasting. They made ostentatious shows of their faith and religion because they wanted others to see them and be impressed by how religious they were, or so they thought.

But that really isn't the purpose of Lent, is it? Rather, we hope during this time we can draw closer to God in truth and sincerity, and renew ourselves in our commitment to Christ.

III.

And we might begin with what will happen immediately following this homily. You all will be invited to the observance of a holy Lent, and the Prayer Book lists five ways in which we are called to do that. They are self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

These practices call us to consider the priority of faith in our lives, and to undertake some godly activities to strengthen our faith. Let's briefly look at each of them. They also are mentioned in my newsletter article this month.

Self-examination and repentance is a good place to begin. An honest appraisal of our lives brings to mind our imperfections. And true repentance means more than feeling regretful about them. It means actually doing something to change the *status quo*.

Prayer is the next step, and is essential to our spiritual growth. Through prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit we can discern the priorities God has for us. God invites us to pray daily, by thought and deeds, with and without words.

Fasting can be meaningful for many people. By removing ourselves from material things we create room for spiritual things. It can be a deeply fulfilling experience. If you have not fasted before you might check with your doctor before starting.

This leads to self-denial, which can mean “giving up” or “taking on.” We can stop doing things that might interfere with the commitment to share this solemn journey with our Lord and Savior. Taking something on is the same idea in reverse. Perhaps we can do something we have not been doing.

I discussed this in my sermon last Sunday with the suggestion that we might take on some activities that will help the church as well as ourselves.

Finally, reading God’s Word will make other parts of Lent more meaningful. The Bible offers encouragement, comfort, solace, and grace. How many other books offer all that? And we have Bible reading plans in the office to help guide you through it.

And if we have a “Lenten lapse,” we should remember that God still loves us and we should not let Satan whisper in our ear that we have failed. To the contrary. God always will welcome us when we ask.

These are the ways we seek God’s will for us during this Lenten season and they are the ways through which the Holy Spirit makes that will known to us. They will help us draw closer to God.

I will repeat that. They will help us draw closer to God. When we take today’s reading seriously, drawing closer to God is the reason behind what do or don’t do these next six weeks.

V.

So, today’s Gospel emphasizes not only what we undertake for Lent, but also why we do it. And sometimes looks can be deceiving. Like the Pharisees, we can be tempted to look and act and sound like something we are not. But God knows what’s in our hearts. And he wants our hearts to be his.

I pray that we will treat this Lenten season as a time of preparation and transformation. If we seek God’s will for us, remembering especially at this time our Lord’s suffering and death, we can see more clearly and avoid the obstacles to a holy life that the world places in our path.

So, when we search ourselves in prayer, and when we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we can approach this Lenten season as our Lord intends. We will do the right things for the right reasons, and we will live more completely into the life our Lord holds out to us. *Amen.*