

Isaiah 58:1-12, II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Ash Wednesday

It is hard to believe that another year has passed and we are gathered together again in this service of Ash Wednesday. Lent has traditionally been seen as a time when we focus on our spiritual disciplines to correct our relationship with Jesus so we fast, we pray, we read Scripture, we do good works. We follow the methods that bring about a sense of doing the right thing in the eyes of God. But our reading in Isaiah today if taken at a first glance may seem to contradict this message. Isaiah seems to put in doubt the efficacy of fasting. Isaiah challenges the notion that spiritual disciplines are any good at all, especially if it is not followed by actions that reflect God's will. Turn with me now to the prophet Isaiah which is our first reading for today.

**READ**

Reinhold Neibuhr in his seminal work Moral Man and Immoral Society talks about society in this way. He states roughly that as individuals, as humans by ourselves we are much more likely to act morally or in an ethical manner than if we are put in a crowd. As individuals we tend to be able to search out and find the correct and the right things to do. But once we are placed in a group and have to decide as a group what to do then we are prone to decide against our better judgment as individuals. You can see this in a group or mob mentality. In high school I witnessed and became a part of a race riot that I never even knew was happening until I was right in the middle of it. It was one of the most surreal and scariest moments in my life. I saw many of my friends doing things that I knew that if they were by themselves they would be ashamed that they had done. But they were caught up in the moment, they were surrounded by people that were fighting, throwing rocks, and breaking bottles to hurt people, so they went along with it. It is true, as individuals we are more likely to be moral, as a group we are more likely to be corrupt and immoral. One can look at our government today and certainly our perception, now whether it is true or not I am not in a position to say, but certainly the common perception is that as a group the people in government are corrupt.

Lent is traditionally looked at as a time when the individual comes before God and realizes their sin and atones for it in a number of different ways. The history of lent is fascinating. It begin in the early Christian community as a time of preparation and

very intense studying by the catechists, those studying to become members of the community, before they would be baptized and join the church. They had to prepare themselves, individually for repentance. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem of the early church told those under his care about to be baptized that they had 40 days for repentance. It was a time of personal preparation. Ash Wednesday is recognized to have started around the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In 1662 in the first recorded service of Ash Wednesday it was called “A commination, or denouncing of God’s anger and judgments upon sinners.” It was very much geared toward the individual.

Even today in lent it is the individual who comes forward to receive the ashes, it is the individual who contemplates their sin in the face of the very powerful and real symbol of the ashes placed on their foreheads as we are marked as sinners for all to see.

This year let’s do something different. Or certainly let’s look at it a bit differently. If it is true, as Neibuhr states that we are more morally corrupt, and therefore more sinful as a group then let’s see if we can’t look at Ash Wednesday, and this whole Lenten season as a time when we can come face to face with our sin as the whole body of Christ, and not just ourselves as individuals. This is what Isaiah calls us to do today in our Scripture. He accuses people of serving their own selfish interests when they fasted. Isaiah called for a different kind of fast. Not one that affects only the individual but actions that would be done by the whole people of Israel that would affect all people. Isaiah states: this is the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them. Isaiah speaks not to the individual primarily, because he knew that we can all take part in personal piety, but the real challenge lies in being able to, as a group, search out God’s heart and take part in the actions that we are called as the body of Christ.

Likewise Paul in II Corinthians encourages the whole church, not just the individual but the whole church to be consistent with the teachings of the Gospel. They were to remain faithful to the Gospel as a group by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. Paul uses himself as an example and states in so many words: the character of the preacher must

approximate what he preaches. But even more so the character of the church members must approximate what they profess.

As a group of people we are more in danger of falling away from the will God than if we were just individuals without being pressured from each other to do the wrong thing. Therefore as a group we need even more opportunities to search out our actions, to evaluate what we do and whether it is the will of God or not. One theologian, Ernest Best, put it this way “No group of Christians can think itself so firm in the faith that it does not need to go back again and again to examine itself lest it accept in vain the grace of God.

This year, and as Paul states in verse two now is the time, right now, let us not delay, in evaluating our sin as a community. We need to ask the question if here in Strasburg we have loosed the bonds of injustice, if we have let the oppressed go free, if we have shared our bread with the hungry, brought the homeless into our house, given clothing to those without, satisfied the needs of the afflicted. It sounds like an insurmountable job but that is what God has placed us here on the earth to do. If we continue to do this then through us God’s light shall rise in the darkness and the gloom of this world shall be like noonday sun.

But if we do not follow the advice of Isaiah and of Paul then we will find ourselves like those in Matthew 25 who will ask as they are outside the gate “When was it that we say you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” We will hear the answer “As you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me”. Let us this Ash Wednesday confess our sins as a church and then take steps to assure that we as a group seek together to establish God’s kingdom on this earth. Amen.