

Ash Wednesday

Morning Prayer

First Lesson: Isa 58:1-12

Second Lesson: Heb 12:1-14

Homily

What a blistering First Lesson!

We're beginning, as we do every year,
a solemn spiritual quest in preparation for Easter.

And, in doing so,
we put ourselves through some things
that are not all that easy to do.

When there is a priest available to administer them,
we begin by being marked with a black spot of
ashes.

We fast. We give something up.

We attend church more. We pray more.

We do more religious reading and study,
maybe we go to confession.

But, on top of that, do we need to hear this?

*"... lift up thy voice like a trumpet," he says,
"and shew my people their transgression, ..."*

We are used to being discrete.

Isn't quiet, private correction enough?

Not when it's all of us -- and it is.

When we all walk out of church into a busy world,
with dirty faces,

marked with a sign of mortality and shame,

we carry a message

that is not what they expect to hear.

What we say is not

quite what we seem always to be saying,

no longer are we looking out with condemnation,

we are saying this:

"We, who call ourselves God's people, have sinned.

We mourn our own sins and seek forgiveness

and we declare that we need to change"

"Yet they seek me daily, he goes on,

and delight to know my ways, ...

and forsook not the ordinance of their God: ...

they take delight in approaching to God.

That is true.

We are here because we want to be here.

We value the law of our God.

We want to be close to him.

"Wherefore have we fasted, say they,

and thou seest not?

wherefore have we afflicted our soul,

*and thou takest no knowledge?
Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and
exact all your labours.*

Do we ever feel as though our prayer and our fasting
is in vain?

Do our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling
unanswered?

Sometimes we seem to do a great deal for God,
and nothing seems to result. Why? Well listen ...

"...Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, ...

Here's something
we Continuing Anglicans need to hear and hear well:
It is a very easy thing when others err,
and we stay firm,
to measure our rightness by what we oppose.
That's wrong.
We are Christians because we follow Christ.
We are Catholics
because we follow the Faith once delivered.
We are traditionalists
because of what we have retained.
The errors others hold are theirs, not ours.
If we fast to criticize others for not fasting,
we sin. As simple as that. To continue:

*"...ye shall not fast as ye do this day,
to make your voice to be heard on high. ..."*

Does fasting earn us any credit with God?

Do any of our religious observances?

No, we simply can't do enough,
but we can use the tools our God has given us
to make us ready to approach Him when He calls.
Fasting doesn't get God's attention,
but it does get ours.

*"...Is it such a fast that I have chosen?
a day for a man to afflict his soul?
is it to bow down his head as a bulrush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
wilt thou call this a fast,
and an acceptable day to the LORD?..."*

What is all this fasting supposed to point at?

What is the purpose of all this extra devotion?

*"...Is not this the fast that I have chosen?
to loose the bands of wickedness,
to undo the heavy burdens,
and to let the oppressed go free,
and that ye break every yoke?
Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry,
and that thou bring the poor that are cast out*

*to thy house?
when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him;
and that thou hide not thyself
from thine own flesh? ..."*

If our Lenten observance merely draws us inward,
merely makes us feel oh-so-religious,
and allows us to continue indifferent
to the needs around us,
it fails.

We are called to be a light in a dark world,
and, if we truly seek God,
and truly allow him to change us,
and fill us with His own light,
then, as the prophet said,

*"...Then shall thy light break forth
as the morning..."* ,

then, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, we can

*"...lift up the hands which hang down,
and the feeble knees;
And make straight paths for your feet,
lest that which is lame be turned out of the way;
but let it rather be healed.
Follow peace with all men, and holiness,
without which no man shall see the Lord:"*

Let us pray

Grant, O Lord, that we who have this day begun the solemn fast of Lent, being cleansed of the darkness of sin, may walk in the light of thy presence, and may show forth the radiance of thy mercy in this world, that we, and those who shall see, may enter into the glory of the resurrection to life everlasting, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ash Wednesday

Evening Prayer

First Lesson: Jonah 3 & 4

Second Lesson: Luke 15:10-32

Homily

Lent has begun.

Lent is a time of deep sorrow and great hope,
 a time when we examine our sins,
 look them over closely,
 meditate on how really terrible they are in God's
 sight;
 a time when, by long tradition,
 we are marked with ashes,
 a sign of mortality,
 a sign of the ultimate emptiness of all our efforts,
 and we mourn,
 and fast in expression of that mourning,
 but always God calls,
 always God waits,
 and we may come.

Jonah went to Nineveh.

He went knowing that it was a wicked city.
 We know how much he wished not to go,
 how much he wished to stay away

and let the wicked be condemned.
 But God sent him, and finally he went.
 He shouted from one end of the city to the other:

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

Not a pleasant message, was it?
 He expected, and probably hoped,
 that they'd do like most people would,
 that they'd want to keep their sinful lives,
 and either ignore him,
 or even laugh at the warning he brought from God.

Ever feel like that?
 Ever get frustrated
 that you can't get people to change?
 Ever gloat, "Well, they'll get what they deserve"?
 Jonah did, and was looking forward to saying,
 "I told you so."
 But they heard him, really heard him.

*"So the people of Nineveh believed God,
 and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,
 from the greatest of them
 even to the least of them."*

And what Jonah prophesied never came to be,
 because ...

*"...God saw their works,
that they turned from their evil way;
and God repented of the evil,
that he had said that he would do unto them;
and he did it not.*

Then there was the lad in Jesus' story,
the one who took all his inheritance,
and ran off on his own to live a wild life.
He enjoyed himself until it all went sour,
until he finally saw where his folly led.
There, living with the pigs,
He came to himself,
and he knew what he needed to do,
and returned home.
He deserved to be punished,
He expected to be punished,
but for him, for the people of Nineveh,
for you, and for me,

Interruption in Heaven

by Ed Pacht

Solemn stand the singing saints
gathered 'round the crystal throne.
Clouds of incense veil the presence
as the awesome angels shout in praise.
The heavens are filled with rising sound,

with shouts and songs and ringing harps;
and trumpets blare and organs roar,
as hearts in heaven and earth now soar;
and, in splendor, everlasting adoration
fills the universe with glory from on high.
But all the sounds and splendors cease,
drowned and silenced by one small voice;
one small, hoarse, and tearful whisper comes,
and silence falls upon the throngs,
in sudden silence rooted where they stand.

Now a sorrowing sinner sobs before Him,
before the One his actions have despised,
the holy One whose holy will he has denied;
and now an overwhelming sadness fills him,
and for God's mercy here he cries;
and still eternity in silence stands,
and hears, and waits, and sees,
as He that sits upon the throne stands up,
and holy tears of love pour down,
and saturate His holy snow-white beard.
He, kneeling, reaches down His hands,
His weathered, worn, and nail-scarred hands,
to hold the sorrowing sinner close,
and carry him before the silent crowd
- to the throne
- to the throne.
And the holy hush of awe grows deeper,

until it breaks into a shout of joy,
 until the angels fly in exultation,
 and saints, rejoicing, dance before Him,
 and cheers arise,
 and song sounds forth,
 and peals of joy-filled holy laughter
 from the everlasting throat of God
 ring through all the holy heavens,
 and the whole creation fill,
 and all that is or will be rocks
 in holy celebration.

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This is what Lent is about.  
 This is what we signify by the ashes we wear.  
 This is the meaning of the fast we keep.  
 We know our sins.  
 Our sins are simply horrible,  
 but the Father waits.  
 His promise is sure,  
 and at the end there is joy.

Let us pray.

Grant, O Lord, that we who have this day begun the  
 solemn fast of Lent, being cleansed of the darkness  
 of sin, may walk in the light of thy presence, and

may show forth the radiance of thy mercy in this  
 world, that we, and those who shall see, may enter  
 into the glory of the resurrection to life everlasting,  
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.