

SERMON FOR ASHING SUNDAY | 18.02.2018

You may wonder why St James' has moved the ashing ceremonies of Ash Wednesday to today? Quite simply because so few come for midweek celebrations – and Ash Wednesday is far too important an event to leave out!

So why it is it so important? You don't need to be a psychologist to know just how each of us carries around, in our most secret heart of hearts, not only individual things which we know we got wrong (individual sins) but also an awareness of the kind of moral laziness that keeps intruding into our lives, the ways we tend to handle things – the 'way we are'.

In our quiet moments, when we aren't thinking of anything in particular, it isn't surprising that the memory of these things come to the surface: the pain of a particular event may hit us with a new force – or just a dull feeling that we have acted as we always do – and we don't very much care for this default tendency! As Psalm 51 says *For I knew my faults and my sin is ever before me.*

Just to have got to this point is actually quite important. Some people never even think about these things – which is not to say that they don't get depressed about themselves and their actions: it is just they can't put their finger on the reason they feel so frustrated and sad.

The name we give to the tensions we live with, day in, day out, is temptation: the endless round of choices that face us, whether to choose what our inclinations prefer – or to do what we know is right.

And what today's Gospel does is to set our own self-analysis in context by reminding us that Jesus had to endure very much the same inner conflicts that we have to cope with. While Matthew and Luke write up the story in a rather dramatic way – with a devil and a big cinema-style backdrop - we can recognise the same drip, drip tendencies in ourselves too. But for him there was another dimension: how was he going to fulfill his calling to be the Messiah in the particular time in which he found himself.

St Matthew's story picks up three familiar trials: in suggesting Jesus turns the stones into bread we have the call to the 'quick fix'. It is not a million miles away from all those times when we have given into the 'comfort-food' syndrome, doing whatever comes easiest to get around a situation and to satisfy our immediate needs. Or what about the second temptation: if Jesus would throw himself off the Temple would it not be to prove that God was on his side? What happened to the call to follow God unconditionally? Or the third temptation to 'do something', to bow down to the current political or social norms, to fit it with what everyone else is doing/thinking and so becoming accepted and popular? It is the endless danger of sharing a social Gospel which leans almost entirely on caring for people, rather than revealing the need for the love of God.

But where do these temptations come from? As I have suggested in the Weekly News, there is a bit of a debate about the wording of the Lord's Prayer which uses the phrase *and lead us not into temptation*. Surely we can't believe that God is responsible for the trials and tribulations we have to undergo in life?

Up until 200 years ago there was an unquestioning belief in a physical devil, God's own rebel. He is there tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; he is there in the Gospels and he is still there in the Book of Revelation where there is a final battle before the Devil is defeated. Enlightenment Rationalism in the 18th century rather did away with a figure in red with a forked tail and replaced him with a re-working of original sin: that in each of us there is an enduring propensity to do wrong. The Lord's Prayer really needs to be reinterpreted as a prayer to help us to resist that other side of us: 'Lord help us in the times of trial'.

In which case it is reassuring to read in the Epistle of James in the New Testament that none of us will ever face more temptation we can cope with. But that is, clearly, not then same, as having no battle at all to face! Jesus certainly seems to suggest that temptation is a continuing feature of life and we just have to wise up to the fact.

So giving attention to Ash Wednesday (or today's Ashing Sunday) is a vital part of our spiritual health. Psalm 51 again: *For I know my faults and my sin is ever before me*. But the psalm goes on: *Create for me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right Spirit within me*.

Having acknowledged what we are, weak, frail and lazy: we can then take heart in the positive gift that is open to us – not least in the words from St Peter in the second reading: *Christ suffered for sins, once and for all, for the righteous and for the unrighteous.*

That is why Lent is, ultimately, a time of hope. It is about reflection and repentance, yes – but it is also about rejoicing. As we will sing as our Communion Hymn at 10am:

***O come and sing with gladness as your hearts are filled with joy;
lift your hands in sweet surrender to his name.
O give him all your tears and sadness,
give him all your years of pain,
and you'll enter into life in Jesus' name.***

And here is the contrast. I may have said before how annoying I find the L'Oreal advert with its tag line, 'Because I'm worth it' – the idea that we are entitled to this very expensive perfume simply on the basis of who we are.

In reality we aren't fooled by the advertising but it does give a warm glow for some – at least for a moment.

Today's ashing rejects all that. Christ walks with us through the tussles, through all the choices, the pain and the temptation - but he does not leave us there. As we recognise our failings he reminds us that true freedom comes, not because we fool ourselves into thinking we are worth it, but because he has freed us from all our sin on the Cross.

That is true extravagance – God's extravagance!