

Ash Wednesday: Stop – Start - Be

A challenge to stop doing what we know we shouldn't be doing and start doing what we know we should be doing, so that we can become who God wants us to be.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit. May I speak the Word of God, and, in the Word may we see a vision of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

Give it to them Isaiah says God, "For day after day they seek me out – they seem eager to know my ways. They ask me for just decisions" (Isaiah 58:2). God seems somewhat put out that the descendants of Jacob, the nation of Israel, fast as if they want to come close to Him, yet at the same time they exploit their workers, they quarrel and they generate strife. That's not my kind of fast says God. When I fast, there is justice, there is freedom, food and shelter are shared, and clothing is given to those who need it. That's the right way for me says God. Do this and you will be with me.

Well there's a thing. Worship God and pray, and if the rest of our lives aren't in line with God's agenda of justice, then we shouldn't expect our prayers to get answered. Our beliefs don't make us better people, our behaviour does. When we are good news for the poor, when we care for those with broken hearts, when we help those trapped by their circumstances, and then we pray to God, "he will answer and say here I am" (Isaiah 58:9).

Guidance

Once a year there is a retreat for licensed lay ministers in Stepney. In 2008, the person who was leading gave a card to each of us with what she sensed God wanted her to say to us. Mine contained these words from Isaiah 58:11, "The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail".

Three weeks later, André Soares, Bishop of Angola asked me to be his Commissary in the UK. Every year since, I have visited the sun-scorched land of Angola and have always been well - and had enough water!

When we seek guidance, God speaks, often through other people. The retreat leader spoke in faith that what she had sensed was what God wanted to say to me. I believe it was. The request from +André was quite significant, I had no idea where it would lead, but there was no doubt in my mind it was God's will.

That's what it was like for Jesus. Everyone else went home, but he went up the nearest mountain to pray (John 8:1). He was having an overnight retreat, a night of prayer. Time with God in prayer. Then as it became light, Jesus, the light of the world appeared in the temple, the House of God. The people gathered round Jesus, the Word of God, who sat down to teach.

What did the finger write?

We know the story of the woman caught in adultery, and we know that for her to have been in that illicit relationship, there must have been a man involved! We also observe in the story there doesn't seem to have been any danger of the man caught in adultery being stoned, only the woman. So no justice there!

But what did Jesus write on the ground with his finger? And why did he do that? What was he trying to communicate? As this story is related by John, it's quite possible there is a deeper meaning implied as John did deep meanings.

Do you remember a time in the Jewish scriptures when a finger writes? The Book of Daniel records a finger writing "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin" on the wall at King Belshazzar's great banquet (Daniel 5:5, 25). I wonder if Jesus wanted the Jewish teachers to remember this scripture and apply it to their situation.

According to Daniel's interpretation of these words for King Belshazzar, the meaning of Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin was:

Mene: Numbered. God has numbered your days and brought them to an end.

Mene: Numbered. Perhaps repeated for the avoidance of doubt!

Tekel: Weighed. You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Parsin: Divided. Your kingdom will be divided and given to others.

Daniel's interpretation spoke of the imminent end of the Babylonian kingdom. That very night King Belshazzar was killed and the Persians sacked the city.

Perhaps the Jewish teachers were supposed to get the same message from Jesus writing with his finger: you lot have had it, your time is up, you've blown it and now the Kingdom of Heaven is open to others.

What did Jesus say?

The Word of God spoke to the woman. There was no condemnation. Just an invitation to leave the past behind her and start again.

Daniel was recognised by Belshazzar as kingly and robed in purple and gold, but who was Jesus? The Pharisees couldn't decide. It was too hard. They were paralysed by the enormity of Jesus' challenge to their experience of God.

I wonder whether we are ever paralysed spiritually. Anne Frank wrote in her Diary of a Young Girl, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Clearly, she wasn't paralysed by inaction even though it wasn't safe for her to go out into the city.

We can find three steps to take in these Words of God the Father and God the Son recorded by Isaiah and John:

1. **Stop doing what you know you shouldn't** – Are we exploiting anybody? Do we quarrel with anyone? Do we generate strife? Do we have the wrong sort of relationship with someone else? We may think that only we know, but actually our friends know, and God knows too.
2. **Start doing what you know you should** – We are called to be good news for the poor, to care and to help. To have right relationships. For 25 years, The Manna has been ministering to the needs of homeless and marginalised people in this community. With people being forced into destitution through benefit sanctioning, there is a significant need in this community. In the last official count of those living rough, there were 21 people in Islington sleeping on streets, and in parks and safe places. There is no shortage of opportunities for a fast like God's through simply providing pastoral care in our community, by volunteering with The Manna or Urban Hope, being alongside someone, or supporting others involved in God's mission throughout the world such as in our twinned parish of St Stephen's, Luanda.
3. **Be who God wants you to be** – My favourite words of Morning Prayer are, "May the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you." So if we've stopped doing what we know we shouldn't and we've started or continued doing what we know we should, then it will be obvious to everyone that our hearts are on fire with the love of God. That's when we can come to rely on God's guidance and strength being with us always (Isaiah 58:11). That's what the Holy Spirit is doing in us.

Perhaps for some this is all very straightforward. It's obvious what to stop, what to start or continue, and who God wants us to be. For others, these will not be simple steps and if you can take all three by Easter, you will have had a great Lent! For some, this is the work of a lifetime, and if we can get through one cycle of stopping and starting, then we will have moved on our journey one stage closer to who God wants us to be.

Wondering

I wonder what we are doing that corrupts the love of God.

I wonder what we should be doing more of.

I wonder how we can draw nearer to God this Lent.