

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18

2 Cor 5:20-6:2

Mt 6:1-6,16-18

The Book of Joel is a call to God's people to repent and turn back to the God whom they had abandoned. What sparked this prophetic call was a devastating locust plague that had destroyed the food crops of God's people. Joel gave them a stern warning that if they think the plague crisis is bad, it pales into insignificance alongside God's final judgment that would fall upon them if they did not turn their lives away from self-centredness to one of listening, worshipping and obeying God.

The journey from self-reliance to God-reliance is a difficult and strenuous one. This is the theme of TS Eliot's long poem, 'Ash Wednesday' which he wrote in 1930, having abandoning atheism in 1927 to embrace High Church Anglicanism. Three years after his conversion he shares the struggles of changing one's belief system from a self-reliant one to a God-reliant one, especially in an age of uncertainty following the aftermath of the 1926 General Strike and trouble brewing in Europe which led to WWII. The poem is about a person who has lacked faith in the past, has somehow found the courage through spiritual exhaustion, to seek faith.

Each Lent the Church calls us to turn and keep turning from self to God. This turning is a spiritual turning and to keep us on track, we are asked to practice the physical exercises of fasting and abstinence from food or some behaviour we might be addicted to. Everywhere we go we see people holding phones, glued to screens like moths attracted to light. Not only that, we are asked to increase our devotion, mass attendance, prayer, spiritual reading and giving, financial or otherwise, to a worthy cause. All these things are not ends in themselves but intended to keep us on track as we turn to God and deepen our relationship with him.

None of this is easy. After all, Lent may end with the promise of the Resurrection, but the journey travels through wastelands, denial, suffering and death. The Anglican priest and poet, George Herbert describes Lent as a feast and those who cannot exercise restraint, as emotional self-centred weaklings.

Welcome dear feast of Lent:

*Who loves not thee, he loves not Temperance or Authority,
But is composed of passion.*

*Who goeth in the way which Christ has gone,
Is much more sure to meet with him, than one
That travelleth by-ways:*

*Perhaps my God, though he be far before
May turn and take me by the hand, and more:
May strengthen my decays.*

Msgr Harry Entwistle

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