

Now Is the Time
Ash Wednesday-February 22, 2012

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

“Now is the acceptable time; . . . now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). These are words of hope after some pretty depressing scripture readings! This is the dichotomy and the blessing of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Tonight we come together as people who sometimes experience hopelessness. Yet with Christ we are a people with a hope that is certain.

Lent, like Advent, is a season of preparation. Where Advent prepares us for the coming of Christ, Lent prepares us to remember anew his sacrifice on our behalf.

Lent originated in the Roman church around the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century. It was a time for those adults who were to be baptized at the Easter Vigil service to enter into their final preparations, culminating the three years (yes, three years) of teaching and spiritual reflection required of them before they could become full members of the church.

In those early days, Lent began with a spiritual humbling. Ash Wednesday was later given its name because the new members and other Christians who participated received ashes on their foreheads to remind them and others of their sin, mortality, and repentance. From the times of the prophets, ashes were the symbol of penitence and mortality.

I encourage you to use this evening as a time to reflect on your own relationship with God. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded to look inward at our own hearts and outward toward Christ.

In our first reading tonight, the prophet Joel warns about a day of judgment, yet calls for repentance and reconciliation with God. The 51st Psalm that David wrote after his affair with Bathsheba, which we will hear in a few minutes, repeats the same theme: we have sinned and seemingly are without hope. Yet somehow hope remains; hope is in God.

In the epistle reading, Paul returns to a similar subject when he tells of grace and hope. He gives us reason for hoping. Whether we are burdened by sin or depression, by illness or a sense of futility, Christ is our hope. Through him we can be reconciled to God, from whom we were estranged by our sin.

Everything old has passed away, says Paul. Everything has become new. This is what the psalmist experienced. Even after his horrible acts, including murder, he was eventually able to put the painful, even sinful past behind him because of the grace and mercy of God.

The message of Lent, of penitence, really is a message of peace and comfort. It is only when we recognize where we would be without God that we can understand what it means that we have been redeemed from hopelessness.

Paul calls the Corinthians not only to consider their past, and therefore their need for God, but he says that God calls them to a ministry of reconciliation. Likewise, we are called by God to help people be reconciled with God and their fellow human beings. And we are called to reconciliation in our own personal relationships.

Finally, Paul makes an emphatic statement about the present situation. “Now is the acceptable time; . . . now is the day of salvation!” Notice that he doesn’t beat the reader over the head shouting, “Now is the time of God’s judgment, so get your act together or else!” No, now is the acceptable time. It is a call to reconciliation. Now. Don’t wait.

Though we live in a culture of immediate gratification and response, it is often the important things we put off until a later time. We can become sluggish and lazy in matters of faith, imagining there is always more time – always some point in the future – when we can set things right with God and our neighbor.

This is not the way of the gospel. Each moment is filled with importance. Each day is a day ripe with opportunity and possibility. Each encounter is a chance to do the right thing. Each prayer is a time to start over with God.

As Lent is the time for reflection, for penitence, for self-examination, begin today. Now is the acceptable time. Search your own heart. In what areas are you far from God? Are there people from whom you need to seek forgiveness? Are there people you need to forgive? What in your life needs to be made right? Let the ashes be your symbol of mourning those shortcomings and of repentance.

Have you been putting off God’s call to discipleship in some way? Now is the acceptable time.

Make this Lenten season a time when you determine to make every day count. Resolve to follow some new (for you) or renewed spiritual practice during the next weeks, so that when you celebrate the resurrection, you will see that you have indeed been changed in the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

Now is the time to renew your prayer and meditative practices. Perhaps there is a devotional book that you have wanted to read for some time. Pick it up and get started. Set aside five minutes a day for spiritual reading, meditation, and prayer.

Maybe the time will grow into something longer, but it is best not to set goals that are so high they lead quickly to failure. For once, set a goal you know you can accomplish, and move ahead with joy, rather than with a sense of desperate obligation.

Now is the time to renew your practices of service in the name of Christ. Where have you sensed the call to serve others? Is there a place where the hungry are fed, the poor are clothed, the homeless are housed, the aged are cared for, the young are attended to, the sick are made well? What is God calling you to do? Now is the time.

Now is the time to attend to the needs of your own soul. It is the time for searching, for self-examining, for letting God into the chambers of your heart that you prefer to keep hidden. Where have you not received or offered forgiveness? Where have you been hurtful, critical? In what ways have you disappointed yourself and God? Now is the time for change, for reconciliation.

As the season of Lent returns this year, let it return to you as a new opportunity for growth. Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Let now be the time for you to be renewed in your faith.