

THE EMMAUS SERIES

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2: 12-18

2 Corinthians 5:20 – 62

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn.

Though it is not a “day of obligation”, large crowds come to our churches on Ash Wednesday to humble themselves as they are marked with the ashes of repentance. Many of them do not regularly attend Mass. This fact is something of a paradox. Many today are inclined to see mortification and penance as belonging to less enlightened times. But perhaps it gives expression to the confusion people feel in their lives and their sense that only God can put things right. In today’s “consumer society” our personal freedom is subtly diminished as our needs are skilfully shaped for us and prevailing fashions carry us along with the crowd. Adopting some sort of meaningful self-discipline as our preparation for the Easter celebration could be the start of a conscious effort to take charge of our lives.

Today’s gospel reading is from Matthew, from the gospel written for a community of Jewish converts. It comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount – after presenting teaching of Jesus on the principles that should inspire our life as his disciples, Matthew adds some of his practical advice. In the Jewish traditions remembered by Matthew’s community, the three practices referred to by Jesus – almsgiving, prayer and fasting – were highly institutionalised in a way that is echoed in the words of Jesus. In Jewish Palestine, almsgiving to assist the poor was carried out in an organised and regular fashion. Announced by the sounding of a trumpet, the making of donations could be very conspicuous. Hence Jesus urges his followers not to have their acts of kindness “trumpeted before them”, not to let “the left hand know what the right hand is doing”. Prayer “in the synagogue” could easily degenerate into a form of self-advertisement. Hence Jesus urges his followers to make only sincere prayers, concerned with nothing but their relationship with their heavenly Father. Fasting had an important place in Jewish practice, and it was dramatically ritualised. The hair was left disorderly, the face unwashed, and the feet bare. The reference to these customs in Jesus words is clear. Often in the synagogue himself, Jesus was not opposed to common worship and practices; nor did he reject the ideal that the lives of his disciples should be an inspiration to those outside their community, as he made clear earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: “Your light must shine in the sight of men...” (Mt 5:16 etc.)

Simple and profound advice. If traditional practices easily degenerate into exhibitionism, the practices of his followers should have no motive, in the secret of their hearts, but an expression of their relationship with their God. In other words a balance must be found, through a motivation that is sincere and unselfish – a simple principle that can make our self-discipline of Lent fruitful for ourselves and those around us.

John Thornhill sm