

A sermon preached on Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2025  
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Isaiah 58:1-12 (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17) Psm. 103:8-14 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

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In some ways Lent is the same every year. Yet every year our personal lives change and the world we live in changes. Given the personal changes in each of our lives and the changes in our Nation and world right now, in what new ways might God inviting us to observe Lent this year?

In today's Gospel, Jesus says that there is always a danger in being part of the rituals and practices a religious community, like we are doing here today. We can go through the motions of religion, but our hearts and actions may not actually be practicing loving relationships with God and our neighbors. We may just be doing a few good things for self-centered reasons. This is a temptation we all face. As Jesus points out, we are all hypocrites at times. We can pray and still be arrogant and self-centered, not God centered. We can read the Bible and still be focused on getting our own way. The church is really a hospital for hypocrites, for all of us who are honest enough to recognize that we are still less than God created us to become and know we need God's help to keep growing and maturing in the Jesus way of love.

As we will be reminded in a few minutes, we are invited to observe Lent by self-examination and repentance. We can't know what we need to confess and change until we first examine our lives in the Loving Presence of God and ask God to help us recognize where we need to change our thinking, words and actions so that we can be more in harmony with God's purpose for our lives. The point is not to make us feel guilty. The point is to ask God to help us recognize areas in which God invites us to keep growing and maturing as followers of Jesus at this time in our lives.

In a few minutes we will pray together the Litany of Penitence which will help to guide our self-examination; help us recognize and name the areas in which we are out of sync with God's purpose for our lives. Then we ask for God's forgiveness and for God's Spirit to help us change our ways; help us to be more fully aware of God's constant presence in our lives and ask God to help us chose wholehearted love for God and all our neighbors, including our enemies. We all need self-examination and repentance if we are to keep growing in our relationships with God and our neighbors and ourselves.

One temptation I'm aware of in myself and in friends on the political left and right, and some who want to avoid even thinking about the divisions and chaos in our society at this time... is the temptation to anger and hatred and even rage toward people who see things differently.

Self-examination leads us to ask: why are we so angry with each other? Why is it so difficult to listen to each other with respect across our differences? Often anger comes from grief we have not named and processed. What losses might we all be grieving but not naming so it comes out as anger?

Jesus is very clear that God created us to love God and all our neighbors as we love ourselves, including our enemies. So what would Jesus say to us about our attitudes toward each other, especially those who see things differently than we do?

This week I read about Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman in her 20's who kept a journal about what it was like to live in Holland as the Nazi's took over the country. In her journal she observed the disturbing things that were happening and found a deeply spiritual and prayerful way of

living in that horrendously destructive environment. While she remained a committed Jew, she also read the New Testament and found it to be a helpful resource for learning how to live with God in that threatening environment. In 1942 when she was forced to register as a Jew at the Gestapo office in Amsterdam, she knew it would be a death sentence for her. She wrote about the cruel treatment she suffered from the Nazi officer when she registered, but she did not hate back or feel crushed by the cruelty. She journaled: “The rottenness of others is in me, too. I see no other solution, I really see no other solution than to turn inward and root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me to be the only lesson to be learned from this war.” (1)

When Etty was taken to Auschwitz where she knew she would die, she wrote that she could understand why the German guards hated the prisoners and why the prisoners hated their German captors. But again, she went deeper in her prayer and reflection saying, “Why should we always have to choose the cheapest and easiest way to respond to each other? It has been brought home forcibly to me here at Auschwitz how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childish perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described” (in 1 Corinthians 13.)(2)

Perhaps this Lent, God is inviting us, like Etty, to go deeper in our prayer and reflection with God about what is going on within us and around us asking how God might be inviting us to respond with deeper Jesus like-love so that we don’t contribute to the hatred and divisions but rather embody more of the unconditional love God longs to see grow in the world right now.

Now I’m going to shift our focus to another dimension of self-examination and repentance that we don’t often talk about. Every Ash Wednesday we read from one of the prophets, either Isaiah or Joel. Both these prophets focus on how God expects nations to practice self-examination and repentance because nations will be judged by God by whether or not they are living the ways God created all human beings and nations to live.

In today’s first reading, the prophet Isaiah is speaking for God to the Jewish “nation” about 500 years before Christ. Many were complaining to God because they were again living under the control of a foreign Empire and God was not helping their nation get rid of the problems, conflicts and injustices they were experiencing.

Through Isaiah God said, I am not the one who has caused you to have all these problems. The problem is, you are going through the motions of religious worship and ceremonies, but you are not observing the heart of my commandments. For example, you claim to be people who are following God, but you don’t pay your workers a fair wage or treat them with justice and respect. You keep quarreling and fighting with each other even using violence in word and actions toward each other. And you think that you can go to worship and that God will be pleased with you? If you want my blessing, God says, loose the bonds of injustice, let oppressed people go free, share your bread with the hungry, in fact, build personal relationships with them by bringing the homeless poor into your house to care for them and their needs. Isaiah continues, “If you stop pointing the finger of accusation and speaking evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday; God will guide you continually.”

Following the Hebrew prophets, in Matthew 25 Jesus tells a parable to demonstrate that when we all face God on judgment day, God will judge us as individuals and as nations by the quality of our love and caring actions toward “the least of these” in society and the world.

Perhaps this Lent, God is calling us, as God called Isaiah and Jesus, to practice self-examination and repentance on behalf of our nation. Sometimes the prophets spoke with anger about the sinfulness of a nation. As they mature, they begin to weep and lament over the ways in which their nation and other nations have not learned the lifegiving ways God created us to live in loving harmony with God and all our neighbors and God's creation.

In Joel chapter two, the alternative reading assigned for Ash Wednesday, God says, through the prophet: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment....call a solemn assembly; gather the people.... Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations."

Along with the weeping prophets, Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they did not listen to and follow God's clear guidance to live with justice and compassion for all the people, especially the neediest and most marginalized in their society.

Perhaps this year, God is calling us to reflect on our nation: in what ways are we being faithful to the Jesus way of love and in what ways are we not living the Jesus way of love with the poor and those most vulnerable and in need among us? Like the immature prophets, we may be tempted to be angry and blame others we think are causing this unfaithfulness. But the mature prophets and Jesus invite us to weep, if not with literal tears, then in our hearts. Weeping leads to lament, to confess to God our awareness of the ways in which we as a nation are less and different than God calls us to be, and ask for God's forgiveness and help for our nation.

I wonder, do you think God is inviting us to a different form of self-examination and repentance this Lent?

Perhaps we are being invited to deeper awareness, reflection and prayer about our thoughts and feelings so that, with God's help, we can fast from participating in the anger, divisiveness and fear that is swirling around us. Perhaps we are being invited to deeper trust in God in the midst of all we do not understand and cannot control. Perhaps God is inviting us to both deeper insight and deeper love for our enemies. Perhaps God is inviting us to deeper honesty about our nation and to weeping, if not physically than in our hearts, lamenting to God about the many ways in which we are not reflecting the Jesus way of love for which God created us...and praying daily that God will help us as individuals, as a nation and as a global village, to grow in our dependence on our Creator and in our love and respect for each other.

Let's close our eyes and be with God for a few moments of silence: How do you sense God is inviting you to observe Lent this year?...

Quotes taken from: BLESSED ARE THE OTHERS: Jesus' Way in a Violent World, by Andrew DeCort. BitterSweetBooks (1) p.92. (2) p. 72