

# Ash Wednesday

A Sermon by the Rev. Brian Coleman

*Wednesday, February 25, 2009*

Happy Ash Wednesday!

Sounds a bit strange, doesn't it. It's difficult to consider today a day of celebration. As we receive the sign of the cross in ash on our foreheads, a sign of our sorrow for sin and a reminder of our mortality, we are moved not to levity but to gravity. This is a day of breast-beating; for wailing and gnashing of teeth, isn't it?

The prophet Joel calls us to sound the trumpet, a warning of imminent attack. For the day of the Lord is coming, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of thick clouds and darkness. The invading army that Joel foresees is a plague of locusts which threatens to destroy the nation and its people. There is among the people a sense of God's abandonment of them, and yet Joel calls the people to faithfulness in worship. The trumpet blast is often used by the prophets to signal an attack, or some cataclysmic event. But we know from other texts in the Bible that this is not its only meaning. In Psalm 81 we read, "Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob. Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp. Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day."

Here the sound of the trumpet inspires not fear and dread but joy and gladness at the celebration of a festival. In the Revelation to St. John we are promised that at the sound of the trumpet the mystery of God will be revealed: how God will gather all people to himself, thus revealing his great love for all nations. Elsewhere, St. Paul teaches the Corinthians that at the sound of the trumpet the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. Hardly an occasion for sadness and gloom.

During the Second World War church bells in England were silenced, so that they could be used as an alarm system to announce a German invasion. Sure enough, on September 7, 1940 church bells rang out to warn of the expected invasion of Nazi troops, which seemed so imminent after the bomb raids in London. Thankfully the invasion never came, and when the church bells rang again, it was to announce the victory won in Europe and the end of the war.

For those who lived through such harrowing times, the sound of church bells still has bittersweet connotations. Like the sound of the trumpet in ancient Israel, hearing church bells ring might have both joyful and dreadful connotations.

If we were to read further in Joel's prophecy we would see that the threatened plague of locusts is averted. The people through their acts of penance inspire God's mercy, and as they turn and repent of their sin, so God turns from vengeance and relents from punishment. Their mourning is turned into dancing, and the sound of the trumpet becomes not an omen of danger, but a call to celebration.

Even though we can see that Joel's dire predictions of catastrophe were averted, because the people of Israel heeded his call to repentance, it is hard to see how this day could give us cause to rejoice. Ash Wednesday has for generations been an occasion of sorrow for sin, a day of personal penance, a day of sackcloth and ashes. But even ash, an arguably unambiguous symbol of penitence and mortality has the potential to speak to us of God's love and mercy.

In their exile in the wilderness, the Israelites were commanded by God to make a sin-offering; a red heifer without blemish or defect. This offering was to be slaughtered and burned, and the ash of the offering kept for the Israelite community to be used in the water of ritual purification. So ash becomes not just a component of mourning and sorrow for sin, but also of forgiveness and purification from sin.

It would be misleading for me to suggest that today is not an occasion to lament and to be sorry for our many sins, but it would be just as wrong to ignore God's mercy and loving-kindness in response to our sin. What I am encouraging, is that we both acknowledge our sinfulness, and celebrate God's readiness to forgive.

It is an important counter-cultural witness which we make today in confessing our sins corporately and formally by wearing the ashen cross on our foreheads. Gone are the days that Jesus warned about, when people respected you more for such displays. Our generation has no regard for such contrition and admission of guilt. We needn't worry about receiving any reward in this age for such behavior.

But if the ash symbolizes only our sorrow, then it is a dead symbol, with nothing to commend it to others. It needs to also remind us and those around us of the joy that comes in knowing the forgiveness of sin and the mercy of God.

So, I say again, Happy Ash Wednesday. And I hope and pray that this season of Lent will be a new beginning for you in understanding the joy that comes in acknowledging sin, and accepting God's inexhaustible mercy.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” John 3:17.

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