



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Wednesday, February 26, 2020
Ash Wednesday

Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday
at 5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Hypocrite!

In the fall of 2018, the Archbishop of Canterbury found himself branded a hypocrite in all the major newspapers of Great Britain. He had just given a speech to the Trade Union Congress in which he criticized Amazon for not paying taxes and described zero-hour employment contracts as evil. He clearly hadn't done his homework as Amazon, at the time, was one of the Church Commissioners for England's 20 biggest equity investments and the Archbishops' Council (of which he is co-chair) advised Cathedrals and Diocese to offer zero-hour contracts – several of these jobs were being advertised by cathedrals at the time he made his speech.

Being accused of hypocrisy is always hurtful but it is also deeply humiliating. And hypocrisy is something that Church leaders are all too familiar with. Over the past few years, the discovery of cover up after cover up when dealing with priests who have abused children means that the public in general around the world has a hard time when church leaders makes statements about morals and ethics.

“Do not be like the hypocrites,” said Jesus to his followers. Jesus spoke with the same authority as the prophets who challenge religious practice devoid of social conscience. The Torah was about how Israel lived not just as a nation but as the chosen people of God – a God who had journeyed with them from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land. Put very simply, religious observance in Temple, synagogue, and home could not be divorced from the social fabric of society. Religious observance was inextricably linked with social justice and civic engagement. “Look,” says Isaiah, “you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” This is the prophet challenging the hypocrisy of religious observance that is unconnected with civil justice. By contrast, true piety makes a difference to others; fasting is not just to make oneself hungry and miserable but should be accompanied by giving things away – almsgiving – and taking things on – spiritual exercises - which makes fasting a means of grace: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to

break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

"Do not be like the hypocrites," said Jesus.

Lent is a time for getting our priorities right. To discover what it is that tempts us to be less than whom we are called to be. When I was at St Stephen's House in Oxford, training to be a priest, we used to have a very simple meal of soup on Friday lunchtimes. It didn't stop some of us going to the pub for meat pie and fries instead! One Friday evening after dinner, a group of us were very busy and, quite late in the evening we got hungry; we used to frequent a particular curry house in the Cowley Road and we went there about 11pm. The service was terrible – we waited and waited for our curry until, in the end, a very frustrated member of the group (which included a seminarian who is about to become Archbishop of York) said, "Mr. Khan – if we do not get our curry soon we will never come here again". Mr. Khan spoke very quietly and calmly – "I am sorry sir; we are praying sir". I am not sure what was worse, forgetting that these faithful Muslims needed to pray around their work times during Ramadan or the fact that we seminarians had already had two cooked meals, and it was a Friday in Lent!

"Do not be like the hypocrites," said Jesus.

Ash Wednesday is a day of contrasts and contradictions. We gather to reflect on our state of life and begin a journey of penitence but so often our observance is pitiful. We even wear our ashes with pride when they are meant to foster humility; Jesus gave his followers simple instructions to wash them off! Jesus encourages us to go deeper. The word repentance, after all, means 'turning around'; turning around from the easy and casual way that we treat our faith and our religious observance. Turning around from paying mere lip-service to our baptismal covenant.

The great community theologian Ken Leech once said this: "The season of Lent begins with a memory of finitude and mortality, the symbolism of dust. On Ash Wednesday, Christians are marked with a sign of the man of dust. Looking foolish, with ashes on our foreheads, we confront our own mortality in the midst of a culture which tries to deny death's reality. The mark of dust identifies us as foolish. Yet the sign is also the sign of the cross of the crucified and risen Christ, and so it speaks also of glory. Here too there is contradiction and contrast." 1.

Jesus came to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah. The one who was sinless, took upon himself the sins of the whole world and stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross. Thus he became the restorer of the breach; the reconciler; the bridge-builder. How significant that the ash placed on our foreheads is in the sign of the cross – the sign of the restorer of the breach.

"We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;" said St. Paul, "as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

As having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," said Jesus, "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where

neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

These ashes are a reminder of us to seek the treasure that is Christ Jesus and to make a difference to our lives and to our community. And the ash reminds us of our human frailty and yet the hope of glory – remember, the ash is simply carbon but so is a diamond! Writing to the Corinthians, Paul said this: “we have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

This extraordinary power belongs to God.

So, this year, the ministers are adding some words to the form for the imposition of ashes. They are used in many other provinces of the Anglican Communion and in many other churches. They are words that remind us that this day is not simply about personal piety but about the treasure entrusted to us who are mortal. They are a means to avoiding hypocrisy: “Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return; turn away from sin, and be faithful unto Christ.”

Some words of Henri Nouwen which resonate with that kind of repentance and faithfulness:

Yes, Lord, I have to die—with you, through you, and in you—and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your Resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess.... I see clearly now how little I have died with you, really gone your way and been faithful to it. O Lord, make this Lenten season different from the other ones. Let me find you again. Amen. 2.

1. Kenneth Leech: ‘We preach Christ crucified,’ page 14
2. Henri Nouwen: ‘A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee,’ pages 24-25.