

'Worthily lamenting'

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote on Ash Wednesday, 25 March 2009

For many centuries now, Christians have gathered together on the Wednesday 40 days before Easter to ask God's forgiveness and to receive the sign of the cross in ash on their foreheads. It may seem a bit strange, then, that the passage chosen as our Gospel reading (Matt 6.1-6, 16-21) includes verses in which Jesus warned his disciples *not* to disfigure their faces like the hypocrites, not to practise piety before others in order to be seen by them.

But of course Jesus was speaking at a time when acts of piety were an essential part of life and earned much praise. So people performed them for the wrong reasons. Today people are more likely to think we've gone mad, or haven't washed properly, if they see that 'dirty mark' on our forehead! But Jesus' message to his disciples *is* a message to us - that acts of piety (prayer, almsgiving, fasting) should be 'in secret', growing out of our love of God and commitment to him, rather than concern for what others think about us. We have to remember this when we plan any extra disciplines for our Lenten journey. But first we come to God to ask his forgiveness so that we can concentrate on the path ahead of us rather than keep looking over our shoulder at the past.

Our Ash Wednesday Collect urges us to lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness '*worthily*', in order to receive perfect remission and forgiveness. I was a little worried about what '*worthily*' might mean. For the Jews in Jesus' time it was clear. There were very exact rituals including words and 'sin offerings' which would, people believed, assure you of forgiveness. And tonight we shall be using a set, authorised form of confession. But Jesus told us that forgiveness is not to do with the letter of some 'authorised Law', rather, it's to do with the *heart*. And this makes things far more difficult.

Reciting a list of all the sins someone else thinks we might have committed isn't enough; it may even lead to a sense of 'self-righteousness'. Lists, words, only become meaningful if they come from the heart of the person saying them, from the heart of each one of us individually. But compiling our own personal list of faults takes great courage. Taking time to stop, become aware of God's presence, and look deeply, honestly, into ourselves is usually very depressing. But there's no point in being anything but honest - God already knows the truth about us so we have to take a deep breath and face up!

But a list of our faults is only part of the process. We also have to be honest about how we feel about them. I find that I'm faced with the fact that, in all honesty, I am not going to be *totally, perfectly* penitent! There will be *some* things for which I am truly sorry and can reasonably promise not to do again. But there are many things which I know I have no chance of putting right. Things about me make it inevitable that I'll continue to 'sin' in certain ways - and it feels dishonest to tell God that I'm resolved not to do so. And there is worse. I know that there are some things which I just don't WANT to put right. Perhaps because they might involve a change of life-style, or a change in some relationship that I value, or saying that I was wrong about something and I'm not yet convinced I was! And so,

if 'worthily' involves *lamenting all* my sins, and being *perfectly* repentant, I just don't stand a chance. So what can I do?

I could give up right at the start, give in to my failings and weaknesses, decide not to go to church at all, let alone on Ash Wednesday. I *could* decide to put up a real fight, resolve to do everything in my power to conquer my weaknesses and failings, determine to *make myself holy!* But both of these turn my attention away from God. If I just give up I turn back to the world with its very temporary, often meaningless, pleasures and comforts. But putting up a fight turns me in on myself. I place all my faith in *me*, in my own abilities and power (Some hope!)

The other option is to put my trust in God. Not that he will forgive my sins as long as I say the right words or do the right actions, but that he loves me *unconditionally*, weakness, failings, sins, sinfulness. And for me, this is what *worthily* means – that I come to God acknowledging deep in my heart that I am, and will continue to be, weak and sinful, but *trusting* that he loves me, that he longs for me to come to him just as I am, and that *he* will gradually transform my sinfulness if I ask him to and try to work with him.

And this surely is what that sign of the cross on our foreheads is about. It reminds us that we are just dust. We are *human* with all the weakness, vulnerability, messiness that this so often involves. And because the dust is in the shape of the cross, it reminds us that God demonstrated his love for us by taking human flesh, human 'dust', and by taking my sins from me and carrying them to the cross.

So, we can go out tonight free to concentrate on the days ahead. We can go rejoicing in the fact that God loves us, just as we are, and that not only our past sins are forgiven, but also our *sinfulness*. We can go strengthened by the knowledge that, because God took the form of dust just like us, he understands how much we need his grace and strength in all that we do, especially in any extra disciplines we undertake in response to his love. He will be with us in our Lenten journey, in any small successes and in the inevitable failures, ready to pick us up whenever we turn to him. And we can go firm in the faith that God, in Christ, will be with us through the whole of life's journey, not just during these 40 days of Lent, until we are fully transformed into the glory of his resurrection. Amen.