

St Brandon's, Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 26th February 2020.

2 Corinthians 5:20b- 6:10, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Reconciliation & Righteousness

Alison Hobbs

Lent, unlike Advent, has much more space in it: we're not overly distracted with preparations as we are in the lead up to Christmas.

Lent has time in it for ourselves and God, individually and collectively, as Church and society.

I bet if I asked what the focus of Lent is, most people would answer 'sin!' So where do we find sin in our lives?

Well, plenty to choose from I would suggest, when we consider that we confess our sin on behalf of ourselves and the world.

Our Lent book is going to give us material to think about these global and even cosmic dimensions, being about creation and climate change.

But the readings point us to two subtler ones. To place them, first let us remind ourselves what sin is.

Sin is a very big word these days with a very broad brush but for Christians it is simply the turning away from God – letting something turn our heads or come between us and God.

In the gospel reading, Jesus points out the way the hypocrites call attention to their alms giving, praying and fasting.

A hypocrite is someone who is two-faced: looking both towards God but also, distracted by their own need for importance and self-promotion, turning their heads away from God.

The right way, Jesus says, is to look only to God, 'who is in secret' which I take to mean is in the heart and soul.

When you are about God's business, in prayer, in worship, align yourself fully in mind, heart, and soul with the Father. You cannot do it if you are looking two ways at once, and the heart must be involved if it is to be transformative.

That takes us into the Paul reading.

Paul starts,

"We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

To be fully present to God we need to be reconciled to God and to each other.

That is why we share the Peace before we receive communion.

Paul is appealing to the Corinthian church for reconciliation between them and him, as much as between them and God. Relations are strained between them, Paul may have been fearing the Corinthians were in danger of committing apostasy – meaning abandoning or renouncing a religious belief or principle; it comes from the Greek word 'defection'.

Paul, as leader, could see what was happening in Corinth and exhorted them to return to unity with him and each other in order to find unity with God: one-body, one-Spirit. He is inviting – appealing to them – to see no obstacle is put in anyone's way so that no fault may be found with their ministry.

Working backwards from the end of his list of ways in which, as servants of God, they are commendable, we could summarise it by saying:

Despite being misunderstood and misread and mistreated, through the power of God, they have operated with truthful speech, genuine love and holiness of spirit, which has enabled them to endure great afflictions. Holding the weapons of righteousness, they *appear* to have nothing but possess everything.

What are *‘the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left’*?

Righteousness is about being in the right relationship to others, and to God.

It’s about holiness, purity, uprightness, being without sin.

Only Jesus is truly righteous, we can only strive towards it, and, of course, rely through faith on that grace of forgiveness that endows righteousness. Jesus having taken our sins on him to progress that process – as Paul puts it, *‘For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’*

It is the greatest gift we could be given.

But we do need to co-operate with this gift!

Maybe that co-operation is what forms the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left?

Hold in mind that list of right qualities: purity, patience, kindness, knowledge, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech – hold that a moment ...

... now consider what happens to that state of being when we are tempted to dwell on divisions, dis-harmonies, hurts and angers ...

... one displaces the other.

We need to do our part in actively seeking not to be tempted, and lose our peace; we need to do our part, *and* receive the grace of Christ's forgiveness. As Paul says, '*As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.*'

There is such a temptation to keep re-igniting the anger, re-opening wounds, it is difficult to put these emotions aside – not to let them turn us aside from our focus on God.

To turn us aside from our need to be reconciled with each other, and to the task of uniting ourselves with God.

We cannot achieve the true treasure if we are focussed on the earthly, if we are holding onto what is corrupt and corrupting. It may or may not have been rusty – let it go – be indifferent to the storing up – free the heart – die to self – or the true worship and true treasure storing won't happen.

What obstacles are we putting in our way?

What obstacles do we feel have been put in our way?

What do we do about hurt?

About self-righteousness?

Take them to God.

Lent is the essential time to do this.

Paul is quoting scripture when he says,

*“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

Then he appeals to them: *‘See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!’*

Now is the acceptable time:

- Take to heart the call to repentance – turn again, with mind, body and soul to God.
- In self-denial – resisting temptation.
- In assurance of forgiveness – as we forgive others.
- Growing in faith and devotion – embrace this as the opportunity, the acceptable time, and don’t let anything distract you, turn your head or heart, or come between you and God, in so far as you can help it, so that you don’t deny yourself the time for growing in holiness that is called Lent.

And may God be with us all, *Amen*