

We're back. We are back to Ash Wednesday. Same lessons, same confession, same hopes that this year we'll get it right. Even most of the same hymns. Yes, we're back.

The Lord is still calling. Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, rend your hearts and not your clothing. Joel is still echoing Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Once more we will hear them call and look over our days and deeds, and turn in a new direction. We will feel sorry for the mess we have made. Especially for the people we have hurt. The ones we could have helped but didn't. The ones who counted on us and were disappointed. Once more there is no excuse for what we have done.

Once more we will stop and realize that the sins against our neighbors are also sins against God. God who has been so good to us, and loved us, we have disappointed. Deeply disappointed.

But then we hear Paul urge. Be reconciled to God.

Now.

Whatever is a barrier needs to be dealt with now. Whatever in our life we are holding back, or holding on to. Whatever in our life that has been worshiped more than God, or trusted more than God, or served more than God needs to be put aside. Now is the time for God to be enthroned. Right here, in our heart.

That is the point Jesus makes also. Our practice of the faith is not a matter of rituals we perform, but is a matter of the heart.

When we give to the poor, it is not a matter of doing our required ten per cent, as if we could pay the monthly rent with God. Our benevolence is not about looking good, doing better than some one else. Our giving is to

be a outward sign of the love that is within. in our hearts where only God can see. <sup>as naturally as the reflection in a mirror</sup> If what we give does not match an inner love, ~~then~~ it counts for nothing.

And our prayers. Jesus said it is not the words, their number, their beauty, not the words that count, but that we truly speak to God. From our heart that we truly speak to God.

And the same with our sorrow over sin. In Jesus day that sorrow was shown by looking awful. And people would say, see his repentance. But God is looking into the heart.

And so once again we are gathered to get our treasure in the right place. For we know that clothing and cars and honors do not mean much with God, but hearts in which there is love do. Looking religious does not much impress God, true humility and awe before God do. <sup>and trying faith</sup>

All of that is why we are back. But will it do any good? I don't think so. If all of our trying harder was effective, we would not have to do this over and over.

But we forget. We keep thinking, maybe we did not try hard enough.

So we are back. Maybe this year something different will happen. Maybe we will forget for a moment what we are doing to see what Jesus is doing.

Jesus is looking at you in love. Jesus is looking at you with a love that has walked through suffering and death and hell for you. Once you see his look, you know you have no other treasure.

That is why we gather, so that we might hear the love of Jesus for us. For when we we know that love, then god owns our heart and our life. Amen.