

ASH WEDNESDAY 18 February 2015

ISAIAH 58. 1-12

MATTHEW 6.1-6, 16-21

Your order of service includes a traditional prayer for Ash Wednesday, with one word changed, because I told Bruce I could not use it the prayer in its traditional form. I balked at the sentence

*that we, worthily lamenting our sins,
and acknowledging our wretchedness,*

You'll see that Bruce has changed 'wretchedness' to 'sinfulness'.

When this sentence was included in the 1662 prayer book, the word 'wretch' still held something of its mediaeval meaning -- a 'wretch' was an exile, an outcast, an adventurer. So it was appropriate to recognise that by doing what we ought not to have done and/or by failing to do what we ought to have done, we have in a sense exiled ourselves from God and from his love.

Today the language has changed and the word 'wretch' generally means simply *a deplorably unfortunate or unhappy person* or *a person of despicable or base character*. Today many people who have exiled themselves from God and his love are not unfortunate or unhappy – they are happy to be, as they would say, free from mediaeval superstition, and free from any allegiance to any institution which has allowed the sexual exploitation of vulnerable children or encouraged violence against people who don't agree with them. Nor are unbelievers all people of despicable or base character.

I was invited one night to be the speaker at the regular Sunday night meeting of the Humanist Society of NSW at Chippendale. I hesitated, wondering what I would be getting myself into. But I found the group very much like the 8 o'clock congregation here at St Mark's – a group of about 40 people, mostly elderly, mostly female, middle-class, nice people, whom it was easy to make friends with. But not many of them looked all that happy, not many of them smiled, so I was cheeky enough to suggest that if they knew God as He truly is, that would put a smile on their faces. I have not been invited back.

In the first English prayer book, in 1549, this prayer was worded slightly differently – the prayer urged God

*Do not enter into judgement with thy servants, which be vile, earthy, and miserable sinners:
But so turn thy anger from us, which meekly acknowledge our vileness, and truly repent us of our
faults:*

Surely this is closer to our position – 'vile' is defined as *morally base, depraved or shameful*. The word comes from the middle English word for 'degraded' or 'depraved' or 'base'. God has made us in his own

image, when we degrade ourselves by behaving in ways which are unworthy of him, we debase his creation and present a false image of God to other people. An image people are rightly ashamed of.

Today, we have acknowledged our sinfulness, as we do every Sunday in the confession. As we need to do. There is no doubt about our sinfulness – I'm sure we can all look back and remember wrong things we have done, or good things we have failed to do, or problems we could have handled better. If the problems are still with us, Lent is a good time to work with God to deal with them. We don't need to feel wretched about our sinfulness, we need to face it, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Today's Gospel is the traditional Gospel for Ash Wednesday – a warning against hypocrisy, a warning against false piety, a warning against showing a miserable face to the world to show how good we are. As if piety were associated with being miserable, as if being good means being unhappy or, even worse, as Isaiah says, to use our piety as an excuse to quarrel with people who see things differently from the way we see them.

The prayer in the 1549 prayer book not only identifies the problem many of us have, that we fall short of the standards God sets for us and so debase his image, it also gives us the answer to the problem. The prayer continues

so make haste to help us in this world: that we may ever live with thee in the world to come:

we can make this Lent a time when we allow God to come closer to us, when we allow him to be with us in times of sickness and of health, at times when things are going well, as well as when things are going badly.

We can give up unnecessary luxuries, the things which waste our money, and use that money to help other people – we can make an extra donation to Anglicare or ABM or some other Christian cause, or sponsor a child through World Vision – there is almost no end to the number of Christian caring agencies.

And we can give up the things which waste our time, like some of the wretched TV we watch, but we don't know why, and some of the unnecessary housework we do, (cleanliness can become a substitute for godliness, in spite of the saying that John Wesley made famous). We can use the time we save to read the Bible and in prayer, and to simply sit still and be open to the God who is always nearer to us than breathing and closer than hands or feet. Those are not the words of Paul the apostle, as many people think; they are the words of Tennyson the poet, but they express what believers have known since the beginning of time – that living with God is heaven, and living without God is . . . the other place or condition. The Lord be with you, and you will have a good Lent.