

ADDRESS 14 February 2018 Ash Wednesday

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17	Return to the Lord
2 Corinthians 5. 17 – 6.2	A new creation
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21	Between you and God

Some shrewd observer of human nature once said, *Too many people want to be at the front of the bus, and at the back of the church, and at the centre of attention.* This is the kind of person Jesus is condemning in today's gospel, probably condemning to their faces. People who were glorifying themselves in their praying and in their giving, rather than glorifying God.

Today we generally have the opposite problem: too many people want to keep their faith a secret. They hide their faith as if it were something to be ashamed of, rather than a relationship to glory in. They seem scared of standing out from the mob. Of losing friends. Of jeopardising a promotion. Of being different.

But the last part of the reading is as true today as it ever was, *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Today most of us have treasures that the people of Jesus' day could never have imagined – houses and cars and boats and jewellery and investments, and toys like model trains and vintage cars and workshops full of tools, and shelves laden with souvenirs from a dozen overseas trips. And thieves don't have to break into our houses and cars to steal some of our treasure – they only have to break into our computers!

So today, as we begin another season of Lent, we are called on to repent of our greed and our pride in what we have, and to seek God's forgiveness for our sins. This is how we claim the promise that, in Christ, we are re-created, we are delivered from our past, everything has become new; we are free to make a new start. But we cannot take hold of the new unless we shake off the burden of the old, through repentance, and, wherever possible, by making restitution.

Our Old Testament reading reminds us that not all our sins are individual – we are not personally responsible for the almost unimaginable sufferings of the people of Yemen or the people of Syria or the Rohingya in Myanmar – but we are members of a human race that is guilty of allowing this suffering to continue, and we are people of a nation whose leaders could do much more to relieve human misery, and to end the conflicts which continue to drive people from their homes, and destroy their lives, and devastate their communities. In a democracy, we all have the ultimate weapon, the vote, and we can demand stronger action against greed, and oppression and other

community evils. A nation is in a bad state when its media has higher moral values than its politicians.

As Joel warns us, the day of the Lord is coming, it is near, in the way the Lord controls time, and those responsible for every kind of human misery will be held accountable.

At the personal level, Lent is said to be a time to reflect upon our sins and upon our mortality. I don't need reminding of my mortality, my GP does a good job of that, but I do need to think seriously about how I use time and money and how I treat other people, as we all do, and how we fulfill our responsibilities as citizens of Australia and as members of this parish family.

The 40 days of Lent are a reminder of the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert preparing for his ministry, denying himself food and human company. Following that example, we may want to deny ourselves some of the redundant pleasures of life, and use the money we save as an extra offering to the ministry of the parish, or to provide food and water and shelter to the victims of conflict overseas, or to meet the needs of some of the many unlucky Australians.

Today is also Valentine's Day—the two days have not coincided for 73 years. Valentine's day is supposed to be about love, but, like so many other days, is being horribly commercialised. I had an email the other day which urged me to, quote, *skip the chocolates and the flowers ... give something that embodies love that lasts a lifetime with an eternity rose. Give a natural rose dipped in 24 carat gold ... shipped in an exquisite case with a certificate of authenticity – for only \$129.* How many of us need a gold-plated rose which embodies the love that lasts a lifetime, when we have the cross, which is a power-full sign of the love that lasts for eternity?

Jesus' 40 days in the desert transformed his life: from a carpenter living at home with his family in safe obscurity, he became an itinerant teacher, proclaiming a challenging but life-saving message, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near* (Mt 4.17). As St Paul reminds us, in our reading today, we too can be transformed by our allegiance to Jesus: *if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation. . . God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.* (2 Cor. 5.18).

From time to time, throughout history, we have examples of the power of reconciliation. Who can forget the man from Greenacre who publicly forgave the woman driver who killed his son in the school driveway? Or the victims of apartheid in South Africa who forgave their white oppressors when they took power in 1994? Sadly, these examples, and other examples, make news because they are uncommon.

Going further back in history, there is another example which is a weak echo of what happened to us, and for us, at the Cross. In the 15th C, the heir to the French throne, the Duke of Orleans, spent many miserable years as a victim of his family's scheming to stop him succeeding to the throne. They even forced him to marry one of his cousins, who had a disability which made her unable to have children. That meant he could not produce an heir. When the Duke did become king, as Louis XIIth, he had one of his courtiers write out a list of all his enemies. All the princes and nobles on the list fled the country, but the king had them recalled and brought before him. Beside every name on the list the king had written a large black cross. This, he said, was a reminder: that as he had been forgiven by the power of the Cross, so he had to follow Jesus' example and forgive his enemies, even those who had plotted his murder. This is the way God works with us.

In our Gospel reading, we skipped the verses where Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. We know the words so well, but we often forget the warning that Jesus gave at the end: that God's forgiveness for our sins is linked to our forgiveness to others.

So, in the spirit of reconciliation, I invite you now, to join me in a brief meditation –

Whose forgiveness do I need, for words said and actions done; for words unsaid and actions left undone?

Whom do I need to forgive, for words said and actions done; for words unsaid and actions left undone?

May God give us the grace to forgive as we have been forgiven, and may we all have a good Lent, in the power of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We will be blessed by keeping Lent, but how we keep it is between us and God. #