

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Ash Wednesday
21 February 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Joel 2.1-2,12-17; Psalm 51; Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

Un-clutter your life!

Over these next 40 days that we call Lent we journey towards Jerusalem and the climatic events that are at the heart of our faith. As we do so we will be met and challenged by Jesus as he offers to accompany us on the way.

In that Gospel Jesus takes for granted three practices central to Jewish devotion: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. He does not doubt that his disciples will continue to keep these practices. His only concern is that they pray and fast and give alms in the right spirit: not to impress people, but to deepen their relationship with God.

Prayer, and fasting, and almsgiving are not quaint, obsolete customs confined to the pages of the Prayer Book and the Bible. They are part of a lifestyle that gets us right with God, with creation, with other people, and even with ourselves.

Ask people how they're doing, and so often the answer includes the word "busy." People take their own busy-ness and other people's for granted – almost. There's a strain in how people say the word, as though they want you to tell them they really don't have to be so insistently busy. They want to be absolved of their busy-ness by something less drastic than cardiac arrest.

Then down the road Jesus comes talking about prayer. With him comes a countless crowd of matriarchs and patriarchs, priests and prophets, apostles and martyrs, and many others less distinguished but no less holy, all of them walking to the same beat.

Some of them by their words, all of them by their actions, deliver to us the same message. If you want to live a life worthy of the name, then pray. Leave some empty space for God. Give up rushing.

One of the features of our modern cities is gated communities and apartment complexes with security systems which make getting in even to visit next to impossible. Usually splendid houses whose prices go well into the millions? So many of these houses have bars on the windows? Bars on the windows and electronic security and surveillance put the homes of the extremely wealthy in the same category with jails and insane asylums. Are these people imprisoned by what they have? Is it driving them crazy? Yet a million-dollar mansion is not necessary for us to need to face the question: Do we possess things or do things possess us? Ours is a society focused on getting and consuming.

Then down the road Jesus comes talking about fasting about doing without. With him comes a countless crowd of matriarchs and patriarchs, priests and prophets, apostles and martyrs, and many others less distinguished but no less holy, all of them walking to the same beat.

Some of them by their words, all of them by their actions, deliver to us the same message: If you want to live a life worthy of the name, then fast. Don't exist as simply a consumer – un-clutter your life.

Author Richard Hart tells the story of a Russian woman whose son was court-martialled and executed shortly before the start of World War 2. The grieving mother searched out the soldier who had fired the shot that killed her son, only to discover that he was critically ill and near death. The mother nursed him back to life--and then adopted him.

So often we experience the world as full of strangers. We do not look for the connection between them and us. The humanity common to them and us goes unrecognized. Their problems have nothing to do with our problems, or so we say.

Then down the road Jesus comes talking about almsgiving. With him comes a countless crowd of matriarchs and patriarchs, priests and prophets, apostles and martyrs, and many others less distinguished

but no less holy, all of them walking to the same beat – even a Russian mother who adopted the man who killed her son.

Some of them by their words, all of them by their actions, deliver to us the same message. If you want to live a life worthy of the name, then give alms. Not just a few coins, but the love in your heart. Always look for the connection between you and that other person. Treat no one as a stranger.

Lent is an opportunity to take up afresh and in a deeper way the invitation to journey with Jesus. To live your life in a way that's unmistakably His: give up rushing; un-clutter your life; treat no one as a stranger.

Do these things, make them your lifestyle, and you'll find yourself walking to the rhythm of Jesus and the saints.

In the name of the One who, though we are dust, invites us to sparkle with eternal light: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

With acknowledgement to Rev. Charles Hoffacker for the general gist of the above: