

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Today is Ash Wednesday, which is so named because in many places Christians have adopted the custom of putting ashes on one's forehead as a reminder that we are ashes to ashes, dust to dust (Gen 3:19).

Nevertheless, some congregations do not put ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday because this practice falls into certain problems, as do other customs for Lent, and that is what we need to look at today.

People will ask: What are you giving up for Lent? Then, of course, there are all kinds of things that people give up. Some give up caffeine for Lent. Others give up sugar. Still others give up social media! Others say: I can't do that. It's too much! But the idea has been that now that it is Lent, we're going to do something extra. We are going to mortify the flesh.

To mortify the flesh is a way of saying put the flesh to death. Isaiah 58 is very much about fasting and what is it about. Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18 are also about fasting. We should also realize that fasting, of course, is in other religions. We see it in Hinduism and Buddhism, and the whole idea is we're supposed to mortify the flesh.

There are several problems here. First of all, to say that there is a difference between flesh and spirit is not part of Old Testament thinking. This is an idea imported from other places (Greek thinking) and is also found in Buddhism, Hinduism, and New Age religions: The flesh is something you have to escape from. It is evil, and we're supposed to go to the higher realm, which is what?

But that's not what the Lord in the Old Testament says about creation. First, he said the creation is good, and so it's not a matter of fighting the flesh, or getting away from the flesh. That's a false kind of thinking and is neither the Old Testament nor New Testament for that matter.

Second is what happens when we try this kind of ascetic living: It always goes wrong. It always becomes a new kind of law by which I am going to save myself, or it becomes an external thing. The word for that is hypocrisy. We slip into that all the time. Luther saw this problem and it is why he often lifted up Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." We have a hard time buying that. We think, of course, that our bad deeds are wrong, but all our righteous deeds? We can't imagine that they are a problem, too.

Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt." We think, well that may be true for others but not us. We deceive ourselves; our hearts deceive us. And the thing about all of these strict practices and pious ashes on the head is that it leads to saying: "Well, now I choose and I am really doing better than others."

One of the striking examples of this is that it is easy to get people to give money if their name is going to be put on a list of donors, or if their name is going to be put on a building.

Recall Mathew 6:16-18: “And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

What you do in secret will be rewarded by the Lord in secret, but if you do it in public you already have your reward. There is no reward from the Lord in that case.

And the same is true when we talk about the seven cardinal sins: gluttony, lust, greed, despair, wrath, sloth, vainglory, and pride.

Most of them are sins of the flesh. There is less about pride, which is one of them, but it really is all about pride, spiritual pride, and how we cannot imagine that we are all caught in pride.

You know the famous illustration: When you point at somebody else for being a hypocrite, you have three fingers pointing right back at you because that’s the way it is. We are all hypocrites, every one of us, and we try to present to the world the way in which we have our problems, but we are not as bad as others. The spiritual life is a hidden life. The Lord sees and knows all.

The second major concern we find in Isaiah 58 is that these verses have a remarkable way of describing our sinful condition. It is not only that fasting goes wrong; it is that we go wrong.

Is there then a doctrine of original sin in the Old Testament? Not really. If we could talk with these ancient Hebrews they would say: What is a doctrine? That’s not something that they think about at all. They did not have either a doctrine of sin or a doctrine of original sin.

If we were to ask them: What do you believe about God? They would reach back into Deuteronomy 26:5: “A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there....” Or Deuteronomy 6:12: “Take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage....” They did not have doctrines; they would tell a story.

Or if you say that in Genesis 1 it is written that we are created in the image of God, they will say that this means we are given a task, a job. We have been given a task of having dominion on earth. Our job is to love and care for this world, this kingdom God has given us. Being in “the image of God” does not mean that we are godlike or have some higher spiritual power in us. That would be idolatry. Being in the image of God calls us to be down-to-earth people, caretakers of this world.

So, too, about the law. In Exodus 20:1, when it comes to the law, it starts off by saying: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, therefore you shall have no other Gods before me," and so on for the Ten Commandments. It is that God has given us something to do, and it is not an abstract doctrine but a way of living.

That brings us to the third major concern which is: Are there two ways of salvation? Are there two covenants? One covenant made with the chosen people, and then another for those who are not chosen, but outside that covenant with Noah? Is there another covenant in which we should keep a few rules but not as many as the chosen people because more is expected from them?

Some have tried to go that way, to say there are two covenants because the Jewish people find what we hold so foreign to them. But there is really only one covenant, and we can see this as we look in the New Testament in Paul. Even though he says in Romans 9:1-5, remember the Lord made a covenant with the Jewish people, and in Romans 11:29: "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable," nevertheless, in Romans 11:16-24, he uses the famous picture of the olive tree, of the tame olive and the wild olive. The tame olive being the Jewish people and the promises made to them, and we are then the wild olive branch that is grafted in. Thus, there are not two covenants but there is just one. And this comes out especially in Galatians 6:16 where Paul calls the church "the Israel of God."

Finally, then what do we say about the difference between the Old and New Testaments? The real difference is that there is something new and different in the New Testament. And that difference, of course, is the cross. On the cross we see the seriousness of sin, something that is far beyond us, beyond our understanding of holiness and sin. The cross tells us how serious sin, death, and the devil are. Sin is so serious, that, as Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21: "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

This is the great message we celebrate as we look from now to Good Friday. In the cross the Lord has not only seen what the problem is, but he has solved it, and we thank him. Amen.