

## Ash Wednesday: Prayer, Fasting and Alms-Giving

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Intro:

- Last Sunday we were visited by the Rev. Sarah Monroe and Chaplain's on the Harbor, and she talked to us about the absolute poverty around Westport and Aberdeen, Washington, & the large number of homeless people sleeping under bridges
  - 62% of the kids have free or reduced lunches (in some areas of Gray's Harbor county, that number is 90%)
  - I'm still trying to process all that and reflect on the large number of homeless people who are sleeping under bridges and in tent cities
- And then, three days later, it's already Lent...
  - And there is a connection between what we heard on Sunday and what we hear from Matthew's gospel and the prophet Isaiah today
  - And I would like to take a few moments to reflect on that connection, but first we need to step back and consider what it is we do in Lent.

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Matthew's Gospel:

- Matthew's gospel talks about three Lenten practices: alms-giving, prayer, and fasting
  - Matthew writes about these three actions, not primarily through the lens of Sacrifice and denial, but how about a genuine practice of prayer, fasting and alms-giving can lead us into a deeper relationship with God, our neighbor and ourselves.
  - The relationship between God, neighbor and self becomes more apparent as we read through the BCP's liturgy for Ash Wednesday
- But to get that it would be good to spend some time looking at the origin of today's celebration, Ash Wednesday and at how the concepts of alms-giving, prayer, and fasting developed over time.
  - And for this I'm indebted to Fr. Dr. Sjaak de Boer of the Church of Our Saviour, pastor of my former parish in the Hague

## The Origins of Ash Wednesday:

- About the year 150, there began in the church an annual celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus.
  - At that time there was no long Lenten fast; instead there was a solemn 40 hour fast that was performed in anticipation of receiving the sacraments at the Easter vigil.
  - At this time, fasting was understood to be a sacrament itself.
    - ...Remember from the catechism that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace
  - The physical hunger and self-denial from Friday morning at 8AM until midnight on Saturday night reminded Christians that this was an outward and visible sign that their real hunger was for God and could only be satisfied in him
- By the 4th century, the 40 hours grew into 40 days, and the fasting was more militaristic, more triumphant, more focused on the victory of Jesus over evil and death.
- By the 6th century, fasting had become an ascetic practice—one of a variety of practices in which the material aspects of life are reduced to utmost simplicity—and the practice of fasting was mostly practiced in monastic communities.
- By the 8th century, fasting was more widespread and ,Lent was fixed to begin on the Wednesday before the first Sunday of Lent, so that there would be 40 days, not counting Sundays, before Holy Thursday, the start of the Easter Triduum.
- By the time of the Late Middle Ages (a time of famine, war and the Black Death), the Church realized that a 40-day fast was too much for the poor, who had little to live on anyway
  - So people were given a choice between the three Lenten practices: prayer, fasting, or almsgiving.
- Centuries later, we find fasting limited to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.
  - BCP p.17: Ash Wednesday and the other weekdays of Lent and of Holy Week (except the feast of the Annunciation - 9 months before Christmas, 25 March)—are to be observed by special acts of discipline and self-denial.

## Greater Awareness :

- These special acts of discipline are not spelled out in detail for us - unlike the instructions given to the followers of Islam,
  - Who are told in one of the hadith, sayings of the Prophet, that during the entire ninth month, from the time when the crescent moon first becomes visible at the start of the 9th month of Ramadan, no one will eat or drink during the hours of from sunrise to sunset.
- We don't have full-day, full-month fasts like that in the Episcopal tradition, but what are we expected to do in Lent. What special acts of discipline and self-denial?
  - Fasting isn't limited to avoiding food.
  - The prophet Isaiah, for example, told the people of Judah that God was not satisfied with how they were fasting and desired a different kind of fast:
    - "Isn't this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?
      - Is is not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them." (Isaiah 58:6-7).
- This kind of fasting—sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your house, putting clothes on the severing ill-clad—
  - draws one into a closer relationship with God, Isaiah tells us, and
    - "then your light will shine in the darkness and your gloom will be like midday."
- This is the kind of fasting that we are asked to consider as we read through Litany of Penance. In the Litany,
  - we are reminded of our requirement to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul,
  - we are reminded to serve others as Christ served us
  - we are reminded to seek amends for
    - our exploitation of other people
    - our love of worldly goods and comforts
    - our blindness to human need and suffering

- our indifference to cruelty and suffering

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## Chaplains on the Harbor

- Which brings me back to Chaplains on the Harbor.
- The Rev. Sarah Monroe spoke to us about the depth of poverty in Westport, and how most kids who graduate from school stay in town
  - First because in Gray's Harbor County, family is important
  - Secondly, unlike Anacortes—which has a well-funded school system (thanks to the refineries) that gives kids the tools they need to succeed in the outer world—the schools in Westport are less than competitive.
    - And, as a result, its very difficult for graduating seniors to leave Grays Harbor county and be accepted to college or find a job
      - So they remain in town and add to the homeless and jobless population
- What we could do during the 40 days of Lent is take a serious look—by aid of the lens of the Litany of Penance—and look at the lives of our neighbors on the west coast of Washington
  - The Litany of Penance is a reminder that the 40 days of Lent are meant to be a time of authentic religions practice
  - The Litany of Penance is there to help us to focus on
    - a greater awareness of God's presence within us
    - to focus on an awareness of the world around us,
    - and to look human need and suffering with eyes wide open.
- And in our response to God and our response to human need and suffering, the Prayer Book gives us a clear choice:
  - We can remain “blind” (it says) and “indifferent” (it says)
  - Or we can respond to the command of Jesus:
    - “Repent,” he said, *literally*, “*Change your Mind*” for the kingdom of heaven has come near.
- I'm given a choice:

- I can hear about the work of the Chaplains on the Harbor
  - I can remain indifferent say to myself, “Well, I’m glad someone is doing something about this, so I don’t have to worry.”
  - Or I can say, “Well, I can do something, even something as novel as not spending money on wine during Lent and putting the proceeds in a cigar box in the back of the Church marked “Arturo Fuente, Cañones” [and “chaplains on the Harbor”]
- I hope that through these 40 days of Lent, we all might consider making a donation to Chaplains on the Harbor and place it in the cigar box as our Lenten Campaign 2008.
  - The Rev. Diane hopes that sometime in the near future we might also be able to make an overnight pilgrimage to visit and assist in the work of the Chaplains on the Harbor
- We hope that through our involvement, prayer and fasting, this Lenten season might bring us closer to presence of Jesus in the poor who are our neighbors.