

Ash Wednesday

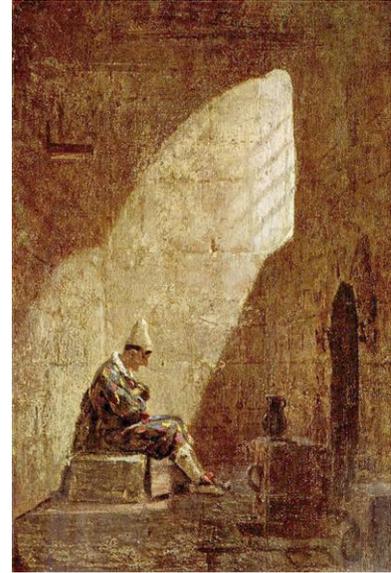
Joel 2:12-19

March 6, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

No Sin, No Contrition

The day before Ash Wednesday is marked as Mardi Gras in some parts of the world, and it's also called Carnival in some places. Regardless of what it's called the day is celebrated with wild parties and excess, supposedly to get all of those impulses out of the system before Lent starts. Sure.



Not really high on the list of festivals I would attend. Traveling to New Orleans on “Fat Tuesday” or over to Cologne, Germany for Carnival is certainly not on my bucket list.

However, there is another tradition that I would like see. In the London suburb of Olney there is a pancake race that has been held every Shrove Tuesday since 1445. The story is told of how in that year a housewife, dashing to get to church on time after hearing the shroving bells ring, arrived at the service still clutching her frying pan with a pancake in it. Today Olney women, attired in head scarfs and t-shirts instead of aprons, dash with a frying pan and a pancake from a pub in the city square to the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. Then everyone enjoys copious servings of pancakes and sausage and all the works, the last indulgence before Easter — just like we did last night.

Through the ages Lent has become a time of fasting and giving up things — denying ourselves something we enjoy. Denial is not really the idea around which the season developed in the early Christian church, but even still Lent is not the holy season it once was. The prophet Joel suggests to us the real reason for this time in the church year, and it has nothing to do with giving up coffee or chocolate: “¹²“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joe 2:12). You see, the prophet has just reeled off a catalogue of problems facing the people of God. An army is coming, a day of darkness and tribulation, and time of wailing and destruction. Joel says the “day of the Lord is near.” Why? Because the people have turned away from the Lord their God. They have sinned. But Joel offers them this message of hope: ““Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me.’”

This is a call to repentance. It is not a call to psychological introspection. It is not a call to some kind of inward form of self renewal or self-help. The Lord says “even now” because the things the people have done against him, a holy and righteous God, they are real. They are serious. Deadly serious. You see, repentance doesn’t mean anything if there is nothing to repent of. If sin is just a relative idea of right and wrong, if sin exists only in me according to what I want to fix in my life, then repentance is nothing more than self-centred navel gazing aimed at making me feel better about myself. If there is no sin, then there is no need for forgiveness.

But the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions do not speak of repentance and sin this way. Again our reading draws our attention to this. We hear the Lord speak through Joel saying “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with

mourning” (Joe 2:12). That sounds more serious. Fasting and weeping and mourning! This is not self-help psychobabble. No, this is the office of the Law. Martin Luther calls this office of the Law the “the thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint and allows no one to be right but drives the whole lot of them into terror and despair.”¹ The Lutheran Confessions call this contrition, and this is what the Word of the Lord spoken to Joel makes clear. Fasting and weeping and mourning do not come to those who have no need of repentance. There is no need for those who have no understanding of sin and its temporal and eternal consequences.

So “rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God” (Joe 2:13) we hear from the prophet. There was a custom in ancient times of tearing one's garments when afflicted or mourning over something. St. Matthew gives a good example of this happening when Jesus appeared before the high priest. “The high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy.’” (Mt 26:63–65).

There was no worse news for that high priest then to hear the Son of God proclaim His Divinity. And tearing up his robes made for a great show. Garment rending shows all those around you just how sorry and upset you are. So of course it denigrates into hypocrisy, what Jesus calls out in the Gospel reading tonight as “practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them” (Mt 6:1). Here's the other

¹ SA III.2.3

thing about rending garments — they can be repaired. One day you tear up your garment and make a big show about contrition, the next day you put a patch on it or send it out to your tailor and it's as good as new. Until the next time.

But the Lord says “rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joe 2:13). A rent garment is much easier to repair than a rent heart. This rending of the heart goes way beyond a superficial show of contrived remorse. In fact, this is a tear you can't fix. You can't just put a patch on it and call it done. You need to replace what has been torn apart. You need a new heart. How can we get a new heart? Joel says “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joe 2:13).

Yes, our Heavenly Father has relented over the disaster of the sins of his people. For those who repent, in faith, another Word is added to the office of the Law, the the thunderbolt of God. This is the Gospel, which pronounces the consoling promise of grace announced to us for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord makes this promise: “**26** I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Eze 36:26). The new heart that we receive is one of faith — faith that is received from the Holy Spirit by the means of grace. Faith holds onto the Word preached, it clings to Baptism and the Lord's Supper — external things that are grasped by our senses and thereafter brought into our hearts. Then our hearts are new.

So the conscience that is burdened by sin and doubt hopes only for this word of relief, for there is no other. It is a word of absolution: your sins are no more. In repentance, by

grace through faith we turn toward God longing for that word, that he “will leave a blessing behind him” (Joe 2:14). Our heavenly Father does not desire evil for us. The Lord will look upon us with kindness. Let us repent. He will not reject us. Let us lay hold of his goodness and mercy offered through the blood of Christ.

This is our focus for Lent — Christ on the cross, upon the hill called Golgatha. God’s Son took our sins and carried them onto that cross. Again we hear the words of the Lord through the prophet Joel which foretell this: “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations” (Joe 2:19). You see, in repentance and faith every good gift is now ours, and we are more than satisfied, for no longer are we outcasts from the sight of God. We are made holy and precious in his sight through the redeeming sacrifice of our Lord. This is why we need Lent. For in this wonderful season, we are invited to “rend our hearts,” to repent, and to again receive the words of absolution, the very forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

In the name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

☩ Soli Deo Gloria