

Jane Ward-Hall

Ash Wednesday Service  
1.3.17

Reading Mark 1:9-13

Part1

Lent - we often think about it in terms of giving up wine or chocolate, something we really enjoy. What's that all about?. To teach ourselves discipline and build our will power? Jesus went through an gruelling time of temptation in the desert, so we have to go through a awful time too? What's all this sharing Christ's sufferings and carrying our cross stuff? Lots of questions that we can have the opportunity to talk about over the next 5 Wednesday's on our 24 hours to the cross lent course.

I think Ash Wednesday and lent are all about new beginnings. An opportunity for a new beginning for our spiritual life. A bit of inner spring cleaning. It's easy to not pay much attention to our spiritual life. We can see it as totally separate to our active day to day life, something to be dusted off on Sunday's and then tucked away again. But in reality life, is life, spiritual and physical, it's all one. We are complex beings. The bible tells us to "love the Lord our God with all our mind, body and soul", with the whole of our being. We could say our spiritual life is centred in our soul. Life is mind, body and soul. How about this for a suggestion- Lent is about improving the health of our souls. A major thing that stops our souls functioning properly is sin.

If we want Lent to help us prepare for Easter and improve the health of our souls, we won't get very far without thinking about the tricky subject of "sin". It's a word we glide over very quickly whenever we say the Lord's Prayer. We've just prayed the confession, asking God to forgive us our sin, perhaps like me you usually do it without thinking about it too much. We need to!

Let's look at a few facts. Fact: Because we are human, we are all sinners. There is no escape. Sin is so much more than just wrong behaviour. Fact: God is holy, we are not. Sin has consequences and the greatest one is that our lives are blighted, our souls can't function properly and we aren't able to walk in the full potential that God wants for us. Fact: God is love and is always ready to forgive us when we turn to Him. Good parents want the best for their children. God wants the best for us.

The book of Genesis tells us we are made in God's image. It's as if there is a God shaped hole within us but we hate feeling empty so we are always trying to stuff it full. We try anything to try to make ourselves feel better but nothing, other than Jesus, works for long. It is as if Jesus is the jigsaw piece that completes us. So you could say all sins are attempts to fill voids within us.

Another way to look at sin is to say sin is anything we use to stop God being Lord of all, including our lives. God invites us to share His life and it's as if we say "I'd rather do it my way". The Frank Sinatra song "my way" is one of the most popular songs played at funerals. That's very sad.

Sin is our refusal to let God be God.

John the Baptist told everyone to repent and believe the good news. The good news is that Jesus shows us what God is really like. God is loving, he is kind and he is good beyond all our imagining.

Repentance is a serious business. It's more than saying sorry and turning our back on our sin. It's letting God be God in our lives. Be our king, really trusting Jesus to guide us. This process of letting go, this process of spiritual growth can take years, in fact the journey of our whole lives.

So lent isn't about tightening my control on my love of chocolate and wine. It's about taking a step towards surrendering to God. Not the surrender of submission to an enemy, but the opposite, the laying down of resistance to the one who loves me infinitely more than I can guess, the one who is more on my side than I am myself.

## Part 2

Let's go back to the reading from Mark we heard earlier. You'll notice it has 2 distinct halves. The first is Jesus baptism in the river Jordan, joining the masses who were coming to hear this strange new preacher who was offering a message of hope. The second half is Jesus fasting for 40 days and nights in wilderness, withstanding the temptations of satan. John baptised Jesus, and the reading says, as soon as Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit "drove" Jesus out into the wilderness. Other translations say "pushed".

This gives a sense that none of this was easy. If it wasn't easy for Jesus it certainly won't be for us to choose to answer God's invitation to surrender more to Him. Our culture, our personal history, illusions, fears hold us back. Living in this broken world is a struggle but that's where we come back to the first section of our reading.

Thinking about our lives when is it that someone says "well done" to us? when do we get praise?. Usually we have to do something "well" which is then responded to by another. We have to pass the exam to get the certificate, win the race to get the medal, be specially good or kind to be praised. This is the human way this is not God's way. Notice Jesus is told "you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased". Jesus is told how much he is loved and valued first, before his work starts. Before he is pushed to face the challenges of the wilderness, before the challenges of his earthly ministry.

The whole Christian Gospel could be summed up in this one point; that when the living God looks at us, every baptised and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus that day. He sees us not as we are, in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. What is true of Jesus is true of us. God looks at us and says "you are my dear, dear child, I love you, I am delighted with you". Believing that God loves us unconditionally and delights in us needs to be the foundation of our life. It's this sense of being loved that will enable us to trust God enough to surrender to him. His love will strengthen us to say no to the sins and temptations that will come our way, and start allowing God to be truly God in our lives. Our souls will be healthier. We will feel better, more whole, less inner tension. Let's make focussing on how much we are loved by God to be our goal for Lent 2017!