

Lent 1, Matins

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, 16 – end and Luke 15: 1-10

Mother Emma, Vicar

On Wednesday, the SMA clergy, together with Vera, our placement ordinand, had the privilege of ashing people, not just at the three well-attended Eucharists during the day, but also out on the streets after each service. It was amazing to see people's response to the question, "Would you like to be ashed for Ash Wednesday?" Some looked horrified, others pretended not to have heard, but a surprising number stopped, either out of curiosity or the stirring of something nostalgic from childhood, or because they realized they had forgotten the date and had intended to receive the imposition of ashes anyway. Even passing black cab drivers stopped, rolled down their windows, and allowed us to lean into the taxi and ash them with the words; *"Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return, turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ."* All received the ashing with respect and gratitude, and many with deep prayerfulness. After all, many of us are conscious of what we may call sin – the selfish act which we regret, or the failure to seize the opportunity to serve others - to make the call to a lonely or sick friend or relative, or to speak out when we witness prejudice or abuse, as well as the more specific sins listed in the Bible.

In receiving the sign of Christ's Cross, it appeared to me that many experienced it as an absolution, as well as being a reminder that we should try to turn away from the greed and self-orientation which tempts us all. Even ashing the smallest children at the School Eucharist, or babies passing in buggies at the request of their parents and carers, reminded us of our mortality and penitence, as we spoke of our sin and our end as dust to those who only just seemed to have begun their earthly lives.

Our readings today continue with this Lenten theme of turning away from sin. The reading from Deuteronomy is a powerful reminder of the Commandments given by God to the Israelites in the wilderness, later summed up by Christ as *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."* Moses reminds the children of Israel of the Ten Commandments given to him by God on tablets of stone, and then exhorts them to keep these words of God constantly visible in their lives, so that there can be no risk of forgetting them.

Many of us may have Jewish friends who continue to have a mezuzah, a little box containing the scroll of the Ten Commandments, nailed to their door-frame to remind them of the importance of living out God's will every time you enter or leave your house. But in case we think that this is not relevant to us as Christians, Moses' urging for us to keep the Word of God and its practical outworking in our lives constantly before our eyes is just as important for us today as it was then, and possibly more so: *"These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach*

them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down and when thou risest up". While some of us may still say prayers as we lie down in the evening, how many of us can claim that we talk of God's word consistently in our houses and on our way, or indeed, that we spend time teaching our children or grandchildren diligently about them in this age when children who do not attend church schools are no longer taught the Bible or the Church's teaching day by day?

Our New Testament reading, the well-known parable of the Lost Sheep, often provokes a level of resentment when Jesus declares,

"Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance".

Perhaps we identify with those who need no repentance, but the powerful kick of this parable, paired with a reading about the Ten Commandments and the place of God's Word in our lives, is that every one of us has fallen short of the glory of God, forgetting to love God before all things and to love and care for our neighbours - whoever they are - as much as we would for ourselves.

Yet we can all come to a place where we are welcomed and rejoiced over as lost sheep. This afternoon, we are beginning our Lent group at 4 pm, studying the book, *"The Return of the Prodigal Son"* by Henri Nouwen, inspired by Rembrandt's painting of the same name. Our artist-in-residence is about to begin her depiction of the same story, which will develop throughout Lent, and we are invited with the Prodigal Son, as we were during the ashing on Ash Wednesday, to *"turn away from sin."*

The tales of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are in some ways a different telling of the story of the Prodigal Son. At the end of the latter, the father declares, *"It was meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found"*. The joy of the father, the shepherd and the woman who had lost the coin are all intended as representations of the rejoicing in Heaven at the recovery of a lost sinner.

We might self-righteously think of ourselves as the elder son, or the ninety-nine *"good"* sheep, but Lent is a time when we are called to penitence, to reflection on our failings and weaknesses, the times when we have all been led astray by selfish gain or lack of compassion. We may choose how to use this time, whether by reading God's Word, and holding it close to us, as Moses commended to the people of Israel, by sharing our study with others, or by spending time alone in prayer, asking for those areas in which we have failed to be revealed and washed clean. We might begin such reflections during the anthem the choir will sing now, based on Psalm 51:

"Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and forgive me all my sin, For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me". Amen.