

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2021

The Revd Alice Ormondroyd, St Mary Abbots Church, Kensington

Readings:

Joel 2.1-2, 12-7

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Japanese art of Kintsugi is where broken pieces of pottery are mended together with gold and fine lacquer, such that the pottery becomes more beautiful than it was before. It's a reminder that there is nothing that is broken that cannot be restored, and that in many ways brokenness leads to the most beautiful of healing processes. I've been struck by this recently, as we've journeyed individually and collectively through the most phenomenally challenging season in living memory. I love the idea of accepting that brokenness is not the final word, that whatever situation we find ourselves in, there are always glimpses of hope, glimpses of reconciliation, and being put back together in a way that is beautiful beyond belief. That is the work of God in Christ Jesus that we believe in, the redeeming work of God in creation.

But it's the brokenness that we need to focus on, today, as begin our Lenten journey together. In a moment we will confess our sins, our brokenness, our need for God. The paradox of the Christian life is that redemption and life come through death, and if we want to receive the fullness of God's grace there is no sidestepping this reality. Today we mark ourselves with the ash of a burnt cross, the humble reminder of our fragile humanity, but also the confident reminder of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. We remember too our journeys of faith, our baptisms, our new beginnings in Christ and the road of discipleship that we walk to this day. We reflect on where we are. Our sin that separates us from God, and once again we begin this season with repentance, with turning our lives around and back towards God.

Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was hugely influenced in his development of the 12 step programme by the work of Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group, who in the 1920's and 30's, worked to encourage men to seek spiritual revolution and transformation in their lives. Buchman's simple tenets began with the acknowledgement of sin, the belief that all can be changed, the commitment to confession, the faith that God could and would heal, and the necessity of those whose lives had been transformed to encourage transformational journeys in others. It's no surprise then, that the millions of men and women who have seen transformation of their lives in the freedom from addiction made possible by the work of 12 step fellowships, all began their journeys, in a room with others, acknowledging honestly their need for help.

Our 'step one', is always to stop, and be honest, to notice where we are, to recognise our need of help, our need of God, and our need of fellowship on the journey that we begin again today. In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus offers some helpful reminders of the disciplines that can help us draw close to God, especially during Lent, the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and giving. Jesus as ever, presents us with challenges – these disciplines in themselves are not easy. But he also presents us with practical support and encouragement, gently reminding of some of the pitfalls of human nature where we turn these vehicles of spiritual transformation into little more than a personal talent show. The purpose of prayer is not that others see it and think how holy we are, but prayer, as Jesus reminds us, the thoughts and words of our inner lives, directed properly to God, brings about change in our lives, such that we don't anymore seek the praise and admiration of others with such incessant cravings. Because when we pray, we remember that we are loved by God. Likewise fasting,

abstaining from something to help refocus our bodies on God, isn't something to use to draw attention to our bodies, but instead it is a physical symbol of our inward intention to seek satisfaction from God alone. To trust that He gives us our daily bread, all that we can ever need or desire. And giving alms, being generous, isn't something we need to use to draw attention to ourselves. God knows, God sees, and God's longing is to transform first our inner lives, such that all that we think and say and do become transformed also, to his praise and glory.

I find Jesus' teachings so pertinent in a time where our connectedness has been so disrupted. I wonder if even more when we can't be physically visible to others, we seek and crave in our online personas to be noticed and acknowledged, praised and judged favourably. But our need of help, our need of love and affirmation, comes rightly and properly first from our relationship with Jesus Christ. Only when our inner lives are rightly-orientated towards God will we be genuinely free from unhealthy thoughts and behaviours. This is not an easy road to travel, but it is, as Bonhoeffer writes, the cost of our discipleship. It is our duty and our joy to walk the road that Christ has walked ahead of us, and together rejoice in the healing and transformation of broken lives that will take place along the way.

Today we acknowledge our brokenness, our sin, our need of God. We remember that we are but dust. We sing 'Lord Jesus think on me and take away my sin'. But we also remember that God has made us to be treasures in clay jars, and I'd love you to hold this image of the Kintsugi pot in your head as you journey through Lent as a visible image of the confidence we can have in this season in God's work of healing and transforming our broken lives. May God be with you until we meet again, and know that you are loved and held in our prayers as you walk through this most holy of seasons.

Amen.