

Reflection for Sunday 14th February 2021
Isaiah 58; 1-12 Matthew 6; 1-6, 16-18

Who is at the centre of it all?

I know, I know – for many churches, this Sunday, being the last Sunday before Lent, should be Transfiguration Sunday. I rather support Transfiguration on the Sunday closest to 6th August, such as it was designated back in 1456 (□). So, I hope I don't disappoint you all too much. I preferred the readings for Ash Wednesday, which will be 17th February. And what two amazing readings these are!

I have a soft spot for the Isaiah reading, as verse 6 was the theme of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches General Council in Debrecen -Hungary- in 1997¹, where I was elected to the Executive Committee, and the Matthew reading challenges the perspective on piety. Matthew transfers the view from “make sure all know about it” to “keep it quiet”. The case is, both readings put God and the other at the centre of what we do, and why we do things, and I am convinced this is what “Walking the way” is all about. It is good to be reminded that the strap line of Walking the Way is ‘Living the life of Jesus today’. I do hope you all still have your Walking the Way bookmarker, because the prayer is worth holding on to, tight: *“Lord of all, as you walked this earth sharing love, grace and mercy, we pray that we will place our footsteps in yours and walk where you lead as we live out your life in our daily living for Jesus’ sake. Amen”*. With this in mind, let us turn to the Bible readings.

Lent is the time to prepare for the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus; his journey towards Jerusalem and to be reminded of why the events that happened took place. At the same time, it is the challenge to realise this is not something of the past but very much our current walking the way, and as such it is our calling today.

The powerful reading from Isaiah, is a call to discern the difference between true and false worship, where clearly worship is not something that is limited to the church building (which the current COVID situation has already shown us), but it has to do with life as an act of worship to God: justice and solidarity. As from verse 3 we are confronted with so many actions that seem to be limited to Lent – giving up things, dressing in sackcloth, and a number of external humbling things. Bear this in mind when we turn to the Gospel of Matthew.

And suddenly the prophet comes through with a crucial question (v. 5): ***Do you think the LORD wants you to give up all these things?*** And then in verse 6 we hear: I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD. Here is where I invite you to slowly read in a loud voice verses 6 and 7 and 8 and 9 and 10. Please don't continue reading what follows until you have done that.

What the prophet is reminding the people of is the centrality of our connection with others. In a way this continues the thoughts of last Sunday. God and others are the essence of our faith, as Jesus would point out when referring to the greatest commandment: Love God and love your neighbour: that is the greatest commandment. And that love for the other is based on the needs of the time. It clearly is much more than clapping the NHS, much as the recognition is worthy, it is doing our part in an active way to recognize the hard work of the first responders. It is being part of the structures that exist today to make this a better world be it the environment, be it avoiding that which destroys nations, livelihoods, identities. It is reaching out overcoming all forms of discrimination. It really means

¹ I attach to this Reflection “The Declaration of Debrecen”, which adds to the discernment of the readings.

thinking of our faith as the guide for all we do, say, think, don't do, don't say. This then is how our light will shine like the dawning sun...when we beg the LORD for help, and we will hear the response "Here I am".

So, in first instance Lent is very much what we do, and do for others, following what Jesus did in his healings, his reaching out, in his teachings and having time for the marginalised. **Jesus DID**. And this is then when we turn to the Gospel reading – taken from what we know as The Sermon on the Mount. The author of this gospel is writing for the people who have a Jewish religious background, so Jesus is presented as a prophet whose words and actions speak to the people of the time. So very apt in bringing together the two readings today.

The Jewish tradition has three special actions by which the people express their piety in concrete ways: almsgiving, praying and fasting. And Jesus is fine with this, what he objects is that any of all this is done as an external sign of 'sanctity', to show off and be praised by others. The good actions are known by God, and God will act.

What we do, we do as a response to God's calling and we do it for others, not for our own glory or vanity. How many so called 'important' people do good things, particularly when there is a press camera near by hoping to hit the headlines of tomorrow's newspapers. Yes, good is done, but not necessarily for goodness sake.

These readings, which are marked for Ash Wednesday, as the beginning of Lent, are set to help us discern what the 40 days that follow are all about. And what we could discover is that it is because of such readings and how Jesus lived them out that the situation developed as it did. And when we look around at the world, we can discover how much goes on not for goodness but for pride. In a way, let's hope much more goes on than what we hear or know about. And may we discern what we can do, even in these COVID times.

As we enter Lent, let us ask God to help us come closer to the way Jesus invited us to live life, so that God and the other are the centre of all we do and say and think; only then will "our light shine like the dawning sun"; let us always remember we are never alone on the journey of life, we are part of the great cloud of witnesses of all times as we Walk the Way today. Amen

Collect for Ash Wednesday:

Mystery of Goodness, by whose gaze we are called into being and held in life: teach us the secrecy of prayer which seeks no reward; the generosity of love which forgets itself; the gift of a treasure uncountable and unconsumed; through Jesus Christ, the Son of the Wilderness.

Amen

(Prayers for an Inclusive Church)

Note: On Tuesday 16th at 2:00 pm we plan to hold a Zoom Discussion Group on this Reflection, if you would like to join you are most welcome. It should last about 30-40 minutes. The link to join the zoom is:

<https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/85429466443?pwd=NzR6YVhDZmw4cEZ6SzA2My9NU3ppUTo9>

Passcode: 555917