



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“ASHES: SYMBOLS OF SIN & DEATH”

This meditation was preached by Dr. Daniel W. Massie at the Ash Wednesday Service on February 17, 2010 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, SC.

Lets be honest, most of us are not overly fond of this season called Lent. It is a downer pure and simple. Not just lay persons but clergy as well, would, if given the chance, write this season out of the liturgical calendar. I heard a minister just the other day refer to Lent as just another four-letter word. Dark, dismal, dreary, depressing, all seem to be fitting descriptors of this forty day period beginning with Ash Wednesday. After all, no child wakes up in the morning asking, “Mom, how many more days until Lent begins?” Self-denial, self-discipline, penitence and deprivation may all be a part of the Christian life, but not one we long to celebrate, unless of course we enjoy punching our martyr cards or perhaps border on being masochistic.

Presbyterians in particular have historically assigned little emphasis or significance to this Lenten season. Until the liturgical renewal movement that began with Vatican II and the growth of the ecumenical movement, we Christians from the Presbyterian and Reformed branch of Christendom did not give much credence to this season. We dismissed Lent at best or mocked it at worst. We looked askance when Christians from other churches told us they were not allowed to marry during Lent because it was a season for the mortification of the flesh and a denial of earthly desires. We criticized pious and especially public disciplines that seemed to call attention to one’s own personal devotion, and also seemed to go against Jesus’ admonition to avoid practicing one’s piety before others. After all, Jesus advised us to practice our religious duties like fasting, alms giving and praying in private lest we focus more on ourselves than on the Living God. Consequently, few Presbyterian and Reformed churches even spoke of Lent or conducted Lenten services until thirty or forty years ago.

In seminary I can even remember some rather immodest and perhaps sacrilegious students who entertained us by singing a song to the tune of “My Favorite Things”.

Sackcloth and ashes, and days without eating,
Mortification and wailing and weeping,
A hair shirt that scratches, a nettle that stings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Penitence, flagellants, memento mori,
Spending nights sleeping on rocks in a quarry,
The sound of a cloak’d solemn cantor who sings,
These are still more of my favorite things.

Tossing and turning and yearning I’m spurning,
Passions aflame like an ember day burning,
Corpus and carnis and wild drunken flings,
Forsaken are they for my favorite things!

When it’s Christmas,

When the tree's lit,
When the cards are sent,
I simply remember my favorite things,
And then I can't wa-a-a-it till Lent.

And no, we will not be singing that song when we host one of our community Lenten services this year.

Actually, we Presbyterians and Reformed Christians have come around a little with respect to things liturgical and Lenten. And yes I know, Lenten observance took place in the early history of the church long before the Reformation this was dismissed this season because the Reformers saw blatant abuses and non-biblical corruptions that had entered into many worship practices. They went so far in the opposite direction that liturgically they may have thrown the baby out with the bath.

After all, scripture is clear and so too is Jesus, that there is a time and place for fasting and self-examination, for prayer and penitence, for sacrifice and self-denial. So slowly but surely those of us from Presbyterian and Reformed backgrounds have made room for some liturgical practices that would have been foreign to our parents. We have tried to accommodate what we see as the best and the biblical among some of the highly liturgical traditions.

I would suggest to you that this Lenten season, like the ashes of Ash Wednesday, ought to remind us of the solution our God has offered to the two greatest threats to human existence --- sin and death. Last Sunday I mentioned that while the Israelites needed deliverance from Egyptian captivity and saw the exodus as their primary redemptive event in history, the New Testament reminds us that our captivity is rather to sin and death. And what God has done for us in the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ is now our redemptive deliverance. In Jesus Christ sin and death have been defeated, overcome for all who are in Christ. Thus, the Lenten season, like the ashes of Ash Wednesday, symbolize the sin and death that threaten us and also remind us of the love and grace of God who forgives our sin confessed and delivers us from the power and the sting of death through our own resurrection, like our Lord's.

Living as we do in an age of affluence, excess, extravagance, gluttony, pleasure seeking, over-consumption and self-indulgence, any act or discipline that reminds us of that from which we need deliverance and of the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life which God readily offers repentant children would be a blessing, if rightly observed. All of us, I suspect, could well benefit from more discipline as disciples of Jesus. And if we make our way through life refusing to acknowledge or to face up to our own sin and mortality, then we are destined to be victims of both rather than victors over both through Jesus Christ.

Historically in the Bible, God's people put on sack cloth and ashes as a sign of their sorrow, their sinfulness, and their need of God's mercy and forgiveness. My friends, we still need vivid reminders of our sinful attitudes and actions. Repentance is always in order, not just during this forty day Lenten season, but throughout the course of our days, because the old sinful nature continues to rear its ugly head and seeks to regain control of our lives. Continually, like the apostle Paul, we must put off the old self with its desires and put on the new self in Jesus Christ.

We also need vivid reminders of our human frailty and mortality, lest we assume that we can put off till tomorrow what we need to be doing today. Ordinarily in an Ash Wednesday service, if it includes the imposition of ashes, the priest or pastor will place ashes on the forehead of the worshipper in the sign of a cross and utter a solemn prayer: "Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes be for us a sign of our mortality and penitence, and a reminder that only by your gracious gift

are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.” And then in placing the ashes on the forehead he will say: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Now believing as we do in the priesthood of all believers. You may place the ashes on your own forehead if you so choose as you leave here this evening. Do so as a reminder to yourself and not to others. And when you get home and look in the mirror, be reminded of your own sinfulness and your own mortality and be open to God’s gracious solution to our sinful plight.

So let us join together this night and this season and resolve to examine and renew our lives, our faith, our actions, our practices and our perspectives in an effort to discover how we can better live as disciples of Jesus Christ and how we can more faithfully follow him in his journey to a cross and ultimately to an empty tomb. Let us consider giving up or taking on those disciplines that would free us from sin’s appeal and liberate us from the threat of death with the hope of resurrection. And let us be reminded day by day of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ that reconciled us to the Father above us and would reconcile us to the neighbor beside us.

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