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Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2010

Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

In the part of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians which we read today Paul speaks of Jesus taking on our sins that we might know the righteousness of God and of the sufferings that he and his colleagues have endured as a result of their faithfulness in the proclamation of the Gospel.

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy our foreheads are marked by ashes as a sign of repentance, as a mark of recognition of our failings as we begin Lent in preparation for walking with Jesus on his journey to the cross in Holy Week. But the purpose of this journey is not that we be weighed down by recollection of our manifold sins and weaknesses, but that we might know the righteousness of God.

In the Christian Scriptures the righteousness of God is God's action in setting things right. It is not an abstract concept of judgement and demand – but one made real in a life lived like that of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son – a love which runs towards the one who is estranged from you seeking to embrace and restore them to relationship.



The ash on our forehead remind us both that we wait for God to greet and welcome us in our fears and failures, and of our responsibility to go towards those from whom we find ourselves estranged.

Paul in the passage we heard today speaks of the consequences he has experienced in living a life devoted to declaring this message. But the purpose of all their suffering was that through their poverty others might become rich. This is about the same dynamic as that of sin and righteousness. Paul in speaking of his poverty seeks to highlight how greatly the Corinthians have been enriched. The focus again is not on our own suffering, or the poverty of what we may have to offer, but on how through whatever we do in the name of Christ others are enriched as are we ourselves.

The challenge with which Paul presents us is to recognize those things in our lives which serve to hinder us in being involved in God's activity of setting things right. But perhaps even more, is the call to be actively involved in this activity of God – to look for and become involved in those activities which tend to bring people together and set things right between them.

And in Joel the people are assembled to sanctify themselves for the task of setting things right – to come together and commit themselves to this process seeking the blessing and forgiveness of God. This is what our coming together on Ash Wednesday is about, and the period of Lent represents a commitment to listening again to God and amending our lives where we need to do so. And in the end to make this a lifetime commitment – to seek those things which reflect the will of God and enable people to live together in peace and harmony.