

**Sermon Ash Wednesday 2015**  
**Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**  
**Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; Psalm 103**

*Rev Dr Jos M Strengolt*

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent; in this period we take time to consider our heart. We ask God to help us to look at ourselves, and at what motivates us.

The evangelist Mathew quotes our Lord Jesus Christ who in the sermon of the mount spoke of our heart. He said:

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven [...] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Mat 6:20-21)

Is our heart focussed on God, in heaven, or is it aimed at money, our house, our job, our career?

God wants our heart completely, undivided, fully. Is that what we give to him? 'Though shall love the Lord your God will ALL your heart..'

Of course, a heart that is fully devoted to God also deals with matters of money, or work, but with a heart focused on our Lord, all other things fall into their proper, secondary place. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be given to you."

### **1 True service to God**

Jesus summarizes what it means to seek first the kingdom of god, what it means to serve God. He speaks of giving to the needy, of praying, and fasting. It is on the one hand about caring for people, and on the other hand about caring for our Lord God and our relationship with him.

The apostle James summarizes this in his letter, in chapter 1:27:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

We know that our Lord Jesus did this perfectly well, and that we find this hard. And as humans we are really so slow and bad in doing it, that our Lord Jesus had to become a human being, for us and for our salvation.

The period of Lent focuses on the perfect sacrificial life and death of Jesus, and on our natural resistance against someone as good as Jesus. His life and death are in a way a slap in our face.

They show how much we fall short in serving God, and they show that for us to be reconciled with God, Jesus had to pay the highest price.

When we look at the cross - we realize the imperfection of our heart. Jesus summarized true religion as love for God and love for our neighbors. We always fall short - and God forgives our shortcomings.

At the same time, he wants us to not despair. He loves us, and thanks to Jesus he does not focus on our shortcomings, but he loves our small steps on the road with Jesus. He is our example and him we follow.

Jesus speaks of Christians showing love to the needy, just as He did. From the beginning of Christianity, Christians have been known to care for the poor, for widows, for orphans.

Julian the apostate, an enemy of Christianity, admitted that "the godless Galileans - read, Christians - fed not only their (poor) but ours also." And Tertullian, ca. 150AD, wrote that the Christians' deeds of love were so noble that the pagan world confessed in astonishment, 'See how they love one another.'

In Lent, we ask ourselves very concretely, what can we do for the poor? In this respect the Gospel is very radical. Jesus tells us that we must not gather treasures on earth. We have to lay up treasures in heaven.

That means, with our words and deeds we have to invest in our heavenly bank account. To store up money here is not how to serve God, but to use what we have for the sake of other people, that is what God wants from us.

This is why in Lent often we set aside extra money for giving to the poor and for other charitable goals. Take some time tonight or tomorrow to consider how you can do something serious and practical for showing your love for others.

Jesus also speaks of prayer. As followers of our Lord we pray to God our Father and Jesus taught us how to pray. In every worship service we pray the Lord's prayer. In the early church, in one of the oldest documents, called the Didache, the believers were told to pray the Lord's prayer three times each day.

And that is also a good habit in our time of Lent. We pray more than usual because we are more aware than ever that we need our Lord to be gracious to us.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Why not make it your habit to also pray the Lord's pray three times each day, as the early Christians did? A logical moment could be at breakfast, lunch and dinner time.

And fasting is a normal part of lent. Jesus assumed that his followers will fast. We know of his own example - He fasted 40 days and nights in the desert.

And in the book of Acts, in a few places, we read that the apostles fasted and prayed. And in the letter of Paul from which we read this evening, we see that Paul mentions that he was sometimes fasting.

Christ speaks of fasting just as He speaks of prayer and helping the poor - it is normal matter for the Christian. He does not say, 'if you fast', but 'when you fast'.

By fasting we train ourselves to be in charge of our body and our life - and this ia a hard battle. We love to eat nice food. But when we fast we says to our mind and our body: I will not obey my impulses. We train ourselves to not follow our impulses, but to follow the commands of our Lord. That is a hard battle, and by fasting in Lent we train ourselves in this battle.

We do not let our impulses dictate what we eat or drink and do: and at the same time, we seek God in prayer, because we want to do his will. That is the Christian life and Lent is a short period in the year in which we get some extra training.

That is also why with our sudanese and Egyptian congregations we decided together on Wednesdays to only eat bread and to only drink coffee, tea and water. Nothing else. And we use extra time to pray, and to read the word of God. For this reason we create a small booklet with bible readings and prayers for Lent.

In this way our heart, our soul is trained in the service of God. In this way we learn to follow Jesus Christ.

## **2 Not for the people but for God**

Living for the welfare of other people, praying and fasting, these are crucial ingredients in our life for God. They are for God, not for show in church or in society.

That is why Jesus empathically says, do not sound the trumpet when you give to the needy. And prayer and fasting, do it for God, not to show people how pious you are.

Some people think that these words of Jesus show that our religion should really be a private matter, but that is a mistake. In the same sermon on the mount, Jesus predicts that if we follow his guidelines, people will see our good works, and they will praise God for it. But the attention and the praise goes to God, not to us.

Our religion is personal, it is a matter of our heart, but it must be made a reality in daily life. Jesus does not say that we must be secret believers, but that our motivation must be to please God, to serve God, and our motivation is not that people think that we are good.

### **3 How is our heart?**

And the question Jesus Christ asks us today is, what about your heart?

Shall we use the coming period unto the day of Easter, to search ourselves and to seek God again?

Maybe you have stopped doing that long ago. Maybe you need to renew your commitment to God. Today is a good start.

We will all receive the sign of the cross on our forehead. This symbolizes that we need our Lord Jesus Christ and his cross for forgiveness. It also signifies that our life is for our Lord. He has the right to our mind, our strength, our heart. We take upon ourselves his cross, and we follow him.

He is entitled to our love and obedience; that we are good to others who need our help; that we pray to God; that we subject our desires, and our body, to do the will of God.

When you receive the sign of the cross, commit this period of Lent to God; commit your life afresh to God.

Is your heart with God, in heaven, or is it focussed mainly on the daily things of life?

Take your time these days to consider your life. Maybe make a list of all things that are important for you. But on top of it, write: I will serve God and my heart is for him.

And then decide how you will support the needy, how you will pray, how you will fast this Lent. How you subject your heart and your life to our Lord God, your loving Father.

God wants your heart completely, undivided, fully. So let's give it, again, to him.

**Amen**