

**Sermon Ash Wednesday**  
**Joel 2:1-17, Psalm 103, 2 Cor 5:20-6:10,**  
**Mat 6:1-6, 16-21, Psalm 51**  
**Rev Dr Jos Strengholt**

I know Christians who struggle all their life with the idea that God forgives their sins. They continue to ask God for forgiveness, but they are never sure that He does forgive them.

I know other Christians who think that asking forgiveness is something that you do once, and after that, there is not more need for it. God has forgiven our sins, so we should only rejoice in God's love and forgiveness! Once I was bad and sad, now I am a good Christian and I am happy!

**1 God is gracious - his character**

And it is true, we come to church and we desire to be with God, because we are sure of his nature of love for us, and that He forgives us, and that He desires to give to us what we need.

If you do not believe in the love and forgiveness of God, church would be an awful place. It would only remind us of the power and might of God - but that is scary if it is not balanced with a deeply positive attitude of God towards you.

It is the nature of God to love and to forgive. We read this everywhere in the Word of God; in Psalm 103 we read, 'He forgives all your sins.' That is a personal word, directed at all those who belong to him. It is a personal word for you. He has forgiven your sins.

We read from the prophet Joel, that even when the people of Israel were in grave troubles because of their sins, the prophet Joel says: 'Yes even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart [...] Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.'

Many people live with a deep sense that in one way or another, God is always angry with them. Well, the good news is - God has enough reason to crush his creation; He has every right to be angry. But his love and his forgiveness are so much stronger.

The murderer, the sinner Paul was forgiven by God; the murderer Moses was forgiven by God; the unfaithful Peter who denied Jesus was forgiven by God; the adulterer David was forgiven.

In Jesus Christ, God has shown in the clearest way, that his attitude is one of love and goodness for his people. Our Lord, when on earth, was the full expression of the heart of God. He told us the beautiful story of the prodigal son, for instance, showing that whatever we have done, we can return to God. Even if we have trespassed against all his commandments.

Jesus was open to meet with all people, and to eat with all people. In this he exemplified the attitude of the Creator of heaven and earth. You can come to Him, always. He waits with arms wide open.

Even if you think you do not qualify; and when your feelings make you feel bad; even if you think or feel that there is a wide gap between you and God: He always waits with open arms. Even for all those who are not good enough.

**2 Our need for his grace**

And let's be realistic. You are not good enough. I am not good enough. We do not have to deny the facts. Surely, here at church we walk around with masks of piety and goodness. But we know our own hearts...

We are, firstly, just very small human beings. Sure, if we compare ourselves with each other, some are pretty nice and attractive, strong, powerful. Some are politically mighty, others very rich. But when we compare with God Almighty, we personally shrink very small.

It is true, God lifts us up; by being attached to Jesus Christ, we are seated with Him in the heavenly realms. Because of the love and goodness of God for us, we are important. God is so gracious to us.

But as mere humans, we are just ants. Like grass that we plant one day, and the next day, it is gone again. Our garden outside is a good example of this. For a moment we may seem quite something, but a bit of sun, and gone we are... Green one day, dead the next.

And not only are we human, small. We are also sinful. How dare we, humans, rise up against our Creator. How stupid can we be!

Like the dumb turtle on my balcony. Each time they escape from their cage. And each time I put them back. And one day I may put them in the cooking pan and eat them. I am much stronger than they are, but each time they escape. And I win the battle each time and I put them back.

As small humans, ants in comparison to God, we think we can rise up and disobey and get away with it. We deserve to be smashed and God is very able to do this; but God is gracious. All the time.

### **3 Thankfulness and Penitence is our response**

So we should show two attitudes at the same time. One of thankfulness, the other of penitence. Thankfulness because God is so amazingly good for us. Because he is there with those open arms; because like a loving father, He treats us as his beloved children - because He always looks at his most beloved Child, Jesus Christ, when he thinks of us. How great that is!

And we should show penitence. And ask God for forgiveness, all the time. Christians who do not think we should ask God for forgiveness base this on their theology, they stress that by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God has forgiven us once and for all. So there is no need to ask forgiveness again. No need for penitence.

So they also believe we should not pray the Lord's prayer that says: 'Forgive us our trespasses'. That is in their mind a prayer that was no longer valid after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I disagree with this, because the Christian life is not theological in the first place, but relational, and a good theology describes that relationship.

In a love relationship, like marriage, even though we know that we love each other, and respect each other, it is important to hear this again and again. We must hear it, we must say it.

In our relationship with God, we all stumble much. Yes, God sees us in Christ, that is why we are thankful and confident. But at the same time, we are very imperfect, we seem to be unable to live one day without some sin here or there.

So as in a human relationship, we in our relationship with God tell him we love Him, and again and again we say sorry for what we did wrong.

As Christians, we are in this cycle of love and penitence all of our life.

In the calendar of the church, throughout the year, this is expressed in a never ending cycle. Each year we begin with advent, waiting for the Saviour that we need. We celebrate his birth - God was so good that He send his beloved Son - God from God, light from light.

We then go through the period of Lent, realising our sins and the price that our saviour paid for us. We stand every year at the cross and we beat our chest from sorrow. My sin brought Him there.

We rejoice in his victory - he rose from the dead... And he included us in this glorious event - he carried us to the Father - our sins are forgiven, we are children of God, and He embraced us with his loving arms.

Then we celebrate that He send us his Spirit - he made us into one body - the church. How amazing that we, small humans, sinful humans, have not only been forgiven by God, but that we also share in his life by our attachment to Jesus Christ and by the Spirit that works in our life.

And while we, in summer and autumn of each year, celebrate this goodness of God, we fall in many traps and problems, and we realise the need for God to be our saviour... and by then we are in the season of Advent again.

We do not only commemorate Gods goodness and our need for thankfulness and penitence in the annual cycle of the church calendar - we do it each week actually.

In our worship meetings, we begin with listening to the laws of God; we realise so much that we fail again and again, that we then humble ourselves and we ask for forgiveness. We are then assured that God waits for us with open arms to come back - the prodigal son or daughter is always welcome.

And we come to the Table of the Lord each week, to celebrate his goodness for us; He gives us what we need; but we also come with penitence. We kneel for our Lord God, and for the Son of God whose sacrifice brought us life.

Then we go home to love and serve the Lord - that is our intention. But the next week, for sure, we come and humbly ask for his grace because we messed up throughout the week.

In this way the church teaches us to always come to God with thankfulness and with a repentant heart. But the church also expresses your problems, your feelings, in a dramatic liturgy that draws us from lowly, penitent people who are aware of their sins, to full communion with God and with each other.

And the same cycle we experience day in day out.

Lord God, we do not deserve your goodness and your love.

Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you for your sacrifice for us.

Lord the Holy Spirit, work in our lives to draw us back to God again and again.

## **Conclusion**

Today we begin the season of Lent by receiving the sign of the cross on our forehead. A cross of ash. This signifies first, our lowly state. We are just dust from the ground.

It also signifies that our Lord gave his life for us. He became dust in order to lift us up to the heights of heaven.

Lord we thank you for all this.

Lord we praise you for forgiving us and for lifting us up - and you paid the price.

Lord we bow our hearts for you in repentance. We need your forgiveness again and again.

Lord bless us during this season of Lent; that we come closer and closer to you.

## **Amen**