

A sermon preached on

Ash Wednesday

25 February 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Brother Howard**

Little Brothers of Francis

Lection: Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

+. For just for a minute I want you to pretend you are in 3rd or 4th class at primary school. Do you remember that far back, when life was simple and we had an honesty and naivety that somehow got a bit battered as we grew older? Do you remember “Hands up”? So then, hands up all you who have made a New Year’s Resolution at some stage. Now keep your hand up if you kept that resolution for more than a few days. Now keep your hand up if you kept that resolution for more than a few months. Well, then we have a few/no-one who deserve gold medals!!

No matter how important my New Year’s Resolutions have been, I have never been able to keep them. They may have been to take more exercise, to keep a diary, to lose weight . . . but they never happened. The willpower was never as strong as the “won’t power”! In a sense the whole business of New Year’s Resolutions is something of a charade – a diverting game that has been embedded in the culture of our holiday season, when parties and frivolity rule. But underlying the New Year’s Resolution tradition is a disconcerting spiritual reality. We are not good at carrying our intentions through to the appropriate action. I got out of that by no longer making New Year’s Resolutions. It was a great opt out.

I want to begin the meat of my sermon today with a brief reference to the Anglican Divine, William Law. Law lived between 1686 and 1761. In his very helpful anthology of Anglican spirituality, the episcopal priest Richard Schultz opens his piece on Law thus:

Pow! Bam! Wham! Like a superhero fighting the archfiend, William Law fights the demon of superficial religion.

William Law fights the demon of superficial religion. Not surprisingly, Law’s best-known work is a book called *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

After the turmoils of the seventeenth century, the early eighteenth century (the early 1700s) was relatively calm, and Schmidt says of the church that it was inclined to be “something bland, lethargic and complacent[ly] tolerant”. He goes on to say:

Preachers often assured worshippers that so long as they said their prayers, behaved decently, and gave something to the poor, all would be well and God would be pleased.

It is this complacency that Law attacked. Law challenged his hearers and his readers in their perfunctory observance of the faith. For him, Christian devotion embraces the whole of life. The Gospel is to be lived seven days a week and 24 hours a day. The problem as Law saw it was a weakness of intent. To quote Schmidt again:

Law cuts straight to the place where sin originates – the human will. He strips the soul bare of its self-justifying pretences. The problem is not inadequate oversights or slips of behaviour, but a paralysis of intention.

Here we get to the nub of the matter – *paralysis of intention*.

In my opening remarks, and my flippant treatment of New Year’s Resolutions, I hope I have demonstrated the nature of paralysis of intention. In both secular society and the Church we are, too often, “gunnadoos”. We are always “gunnadoo” something. The challenge is to move from being “gunnadoos” to “can-dos” or even better, “will-dos”.

For Christians, Lent is a season in which we review our Christian discipleship – we take our spiritual temperature. I suspect that for some of us our spiritual temperature is a bit cool- maybe so cold that we are spiritually dead. In reviewing our lives where is improvement needed? How do we prioritise what needs reform? How can we revitalise our discipleship of Our Lord Jesus Christ?

At the beginning of Lent we have traditionally been challenged to look at three of the more important spiritual disciplines; prayer fasting and almsgiving. Above all we are urged to “store up our riches in Heaven”; that is, to value spiritual riches over material wealth. These are the challenges we will face every Lent, as we grow in our discipleship of Jesus and into maturity as Christians. The only difference is that each Lent, the emphases will vary. Let me briefly address some of these challenges.

First, Lent gives us an opportunity to re-assess our prayer life. Two disciplines are at the heart of our Christian discipleship; prayer and the reading of scripture. For me, these two disciplines go together. Scripture-reading gives us material to reflect on in our prayerlife. When I talk of scripture-reading I do not mean the study of scripture, which also has an important place in our Christian discipleship. In this today’s context, I mean that **daily** reading that feeds our spiritual lives, in particular the reading of the New Testament. I am sure my Brothers have already emphasised the centrality of the four Gospels in our prayerlife. It is only in them that we read of the birth, life and death of Christ. It is only here that we can sit at His feet and learn from his teaching; to listen with the ears of our heart to the parables; the healing stories; and the stories of his conversations with his disciples and would-be followers. This meditative reading of scripture helps us to engage with Jesus’ teaching so that it becomes deeply embedded in our lives in a holistic way; our objective being to live the Gospel.

Our prayer and meditation on scripture needs to be a daily discipline, where we begin our days in the presence of the Lord. This way our prayer and meditation become so integrated into who we are that the ethos of Christian discipleship pervades the whole of our day. A couple of years ago I was at a history conference in Canberra. A group of participants were discussing their daily routine over breakfast in one of the university colleges. One lady talked of her morning ritual of taking the dog for a walk. Another went jogging. One man told how he first went online to check the money markets; especially noting movement in the New York stock market. Then he checked the Australian markets, and thought about what investments he might make or change. Only then did he have a shower and breakfast. I was then asked what I did first thing in the morning. I then talked about having an hour’s meditation and Morning Prayer. I made the point that what we did first thing in the morning reflected our values; what was important to us. For me that included spending time with the Lord. I then suggested it was a good thing for everybody. There was a protracted silence, and the conversation moved on to something completely different. It is true, though; the way we start the day will affect everything we do; the way we relate to others; how we understand our place in society; I am a disciple of Christ, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. The man whose day began with the stock market said a lot about what he thought was important – making money! I think, for him, the market reports were his Bible, and certainly, the way he told the story, there was little room for God, or for other people for that matter. If we begin with Jesus, at least we set out on the day’s journey in good company!

The other aspect of this for most of us is making time for prayer and scripture-reading in our lives. One good way of doing this is to actually look at what we do in our day, and prune daily activities to make time for prayer. Perhaps it may mean cutting back on the amount of time we spend watching television, or doing cryptic crosswords. Maybe we doodle and dawdle our way through the day, and the challenge is to be a bit more focussed. It is possible. Recently I felt I was not getting enough regular aerobic exercise, and I made time every day to walk for an hour. There have been several benefits of this. I have lost a little weight; I am much fitter, and I certainly feel better for it; and I have created a time for quiet meditation on my walk. Sometimes when another Brother comes with me we talk, and that is good to, as we often do not have time for those extended conversations that are like condiments to good cooking! So then, think on how you can make time in your day for time with Our Lord.

Traditionally, one of the aspects of Lenten discipline has been fasting. It is not something we talk much about these days – not as a spiritual discipline, anyway. Generally fasting fits more into aspects of lifestyle for those who are particularly health-conscious. In the past, especially in medieval times, fasting was an integral part of Church life. In our culture we are very well-off. If we look at the extent of obesity in Western society, there is a lot of room for fasting – reducing the input of food to levels that adequately sustain our lives, without endangering our general health. Bear in mind that gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins! Even in relatively hard times we eat well, and I am sure there are not too many of us in this church who are under-nourished. There is no doubt that fasting heightens our spiritual awareness, and it is an important practice in nearly all major religions. I know from personal experience, that my best intellectual and spiritual work is done before breakfast. Once I have had a meal I don’t quite capture that same heightened sensibility; my body is pre-occupied with digesting the meal, and I tend to lethargy.

Fasting, then, is linked with prayer, especially in preparation for significant events. Jehoshaphat and his people fasted and prayed for guidance from the Lord, when they were faced by the army of the Edomites, Ammonites and Moabites. In this context fasting was integral to the activity of prayer. It is a challenging notion for us – to fast and pray in advance of significant events in our Christian journey, or as part of the process of discernment and decision-making. Fasting gives us clarity of mind and aids our state of recollection when we come into Our Lord's presence. It is a very apt discipline in our preparation for the passion and death of Christ, and of His resurrection, that we celebrate at Easter. The story of our Lord's forty days' fast in the desert actually provides the structure of Lent for us.

In the Old Testament, fasting is often linked with repentance. It is in the awareness of having sinned that both the people of Israel would undertake a day or days of fasting and prayer, during which they would acknowledge their sin and ask for forgiveness. (e.g. 1Sam 2-6; Jonah, Joel) This pattern is also appropriate for us. One of the disciplines I undertake in Lent is a review of my life over the past year. There are always matters over which I need to repent. To set aside some time to fast, to do that review, to repent and seek reconciliation with the Lord can be productive of great spiritual good for us all.

Fasting can also be linked to the third Lenten discipline, almsgiving. Isaiah makes the point that even a fast can be made to serve our own purposes, and can fail to be a remotely spiritual discipline. God is not impressed with empty pious gestures. In Isaiah 58.6 we read:

The Lord says to them; 'the truth is at the same time as you fast, you pursue your own interests and oppress your workers. Your fasting makes you violent, and you quarrel and fight. Do you think this kind of fasting will make me listen to your prayers? When you fast you make yourselves suffer; you bow your heads low like a blade of grass, and spread out sackcloth and ashes to lie on. Is that what you call fasting? Do you think I am pleased with that? The kind of fasting I want is this; remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun, and your wounds will be quickly healed. I will always be with you and save you; my presence will protect you on every side.

Prayer and fasting are acts of intimacy between the believer and God. Isaiah connects fasting with almsgiving, so that our fasting is not disconnected from the rest of life. Let me illustrate Isaiah's attitude with a more contemporary story. About 25 years ago, I was in the USA during Lent, and a friend took me to meet some friends of his who belonged to the Orthodox Church. These people kept a very strict fast during Lent: no meat, no eggs and no dairy products. In the course of a beautiful Lenten meal, they spoke of how they kept their Lenten fast. You may find their story helpful. For them, it was not simply a matter of 'not eating' certain foods. They worked out approximately how much they would have spent on eggs, meat and dairy products, and gave that amount of money to a charity that supported poor people locally. Here the disciplines of fasting and almsgiving went together in the kind of way Isaiah envisaged.

And finally, we need to assess our almsgiving. When we are blessed with material abundance, our challenge is to share that abundance with others; not sharing out of what we have in excess of our needs, but freely and generously as in the story of the widow's mite. In our culture giving is easy because it can be anonymous; it is also often perfunctory and unthought out. Do we really think through where we want our aid to go?

The three Lenten disciplines we have heard about regularly each year, prayer, fasting and almsgiving are connected. We don't really do one without the other. In fact it is something of a paradigm of the whole of the Christian life; no part of it can be separated from the whole. We cannot really spend time praying for the poor if we do nothing to relieve their want. Our prayer times will be enhanced by periods of fasting. Fasting is connected to ideas of repentance and almsgiving. The poor we meet in our almsgiving give us food for prayer and challenge the level of our own material comfort.

This Lent, then let us review our lives – to really take a hard look at our practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving – and make a commitment to positive change. Let us not allow our good intentions to do things to strengthen our life with Christ be paralysed; let us use our will – power to effect lasting change in the ways we approach Our Lord and each other. It is so easy to allow our good intentions to sink into the obscurity of a past enthusiasm. So then let us take on a moderate discipline; making resolutions about our keeping of Lent that we can manage, and make another new step in our Christian discipleship.