

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2023 (Year C)

Reverend Martin Johnson

Joel 2.1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51.1-17; 2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; Matthew 6.1-6 (7-15) 16-21.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.

Without wishing to tar you all with the same brush, there is a sense that in today's world Lent has lost something of its urgency, its immediacy. It does sometimes seem a little half-hearted. Again, I am aware that right now you may be resisting the temptation to deal with the irritation of your hair shirt, but I doubt it! You might rightly say 'physician heal thyself' because, of course, as is often the case, I speak to you from my own experience and my own shortcomings.

Our readings today don't speak of a tepid response, to God's call. In Joel's trumpet call to repentance, we are beckoned to a renewal which brushes aside mundane concerns, a renewal that wrenches out of normality:

call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elderly, the children, the babies, the bridegroom and his bride. Let the priests weep . . . do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?"

Paul is no less urgent: 'We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!' This is a call to break with the past, to launch out in a new project. There is a sense of crisis about these passages. It seems that our heritage *is* made a mockery, and perhaps that is something of our doing. Perhaps we need to much clearer about where our treasure lies; we do live in a time of crisis in both world and Church. There is no time to delay, now is the time.

One of the great gifts of our heritage is an understanding that time is not cyclical, but lineal. Yet we rarely live in this way. The voice of the preacher in Ecclesiastes becomes ours 'there's nothing new under the sun.' We need to hear of Isaiah: 'behold, I make all things new.' We need be to actively seeking newness. This is what our Lenten journey is about. We have tended to see it as something that binds us or limits us, something which comes around every year, much the same. What our journey should be about is freedom. As the 20th Century American poet Robert Lowell puts it:

O to break loose, like the chinook
salmon jumping and falling back,
nosing up to the impossible
stone and bone-crushing waterfall –
raw-jawed, weak-fleshed there, stopped by ten
steps of the roaring ladder, and then
to clear the top on the last try,
alive enough to spawn and die.

This Lenten season we need to seek out ways that we might liberate ourselves, to break loose. Very soon you will be daubed with ash and reminded of your mortality. Surely it makes no

sense to then return to a life weighed down with the mundane. Surely it makes no sense to then go home and say you're giving up chocolate. It is a call to renewal, to freedom—because the gospel is a call to freedom—and Lent is a time to turn aside from our fatal tendency to see our religion as something that is just another one of those things in life that limits us, a habit or a comfort. It is none of these things; it is a question mark against our values and securities, a question mark against where our treasure truly lies. This is what needs to be at the centre of our Lenten journey for what we treasure are often the things that truly bind us. The English poet Sir Geoffrey Hill concludes his poem '*Lachrimae Amantis*:'

So many nights the angel of my house
has fed such urgent comfort through a dream
whispered 'Your Lord is coming, he is close.'
that I have drowsed half-faithful for a time
bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse;
'Tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him.'

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.

What do you treasure, and will you question it this Lent?

Tomorrow, will you wake to welcome him? Amen.