

## Promises of renewal

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2023

The readings were: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-18; John 8:1-11



The scene is a prison cell on death row in the state of Louisiana. A religious sister is visiting a condemned man, trying to get him to see that although every legal appeal will fail and he must face his approaching execution, there is still hope for him beyond this world. She says

“Redemption isn’t some kind of free admission ticket that you get because Jesus paid the price. You gotta participate in your own redemption. You got some work to do.”

So speaks Sister Helen Prejean in one of the most powerful films of the 1990s, *Dead Man Walking*. Some of you may remember this terrible story based on a real case of a double murderer who came to accept responsibility for his crimes, as the clock ticked inexorably towards midnight and the final preparations were being made for the administration of the lethal injection. Matthew Poncelet (a fictitious name) learned that there was nothing to be gained by blaming his vicious accomplice for the deaths of the teenage couple they had terrorized and murdered. He discovered

there was no point in claiming to be a victim of poverty or a racist upbringing or blaming his impending doom on not being able to afford a good lawyer. He learned that there was no profit in setting his face like flint against the world and denying his guilt. For there could be no forgiveness without confession, no salvation without the truth that would set him free. He had to “participate in his own redemption”; and he could only face this when it was brought home to him that he, *even he*, was a beloved child of God, a point vehemently denied, of course, by the many judgmental characters in the film.

We are all beloved children of God, but we must “participate in our own redemption.” Today, at the beginning of Lent, our liturgy invites us to enter the darkness of our sin, to recognize it for what it is and face the pain it has caused ourselves and others. We may find consolation in the thought that our sins are perhaps less extreme than other people’s but so, of course, did those preparing to stone the woman caught in adultery. It’s not our business to feel holier than others and to cast stones at others, but to know that our nature is flawed and reflect on our own shortcomings.

Jesus didn’t have much time for applying rules and regulations as a first principle. The scribes and the Pharisees knew their Law well: the woman *should have been* stoned to death – but Jesus’s instinct was to find another way of dealing with the issue. The religious people harangued him, but he refused to look at them and stared at the ground, doodling in the dust. He “wrote with his finger on the ground,” we read.





What was he writing? Was Jesus writing a new law? Unlikely. It has been suggested that “the most religious thing ... Jesus shows us may be the *loving acceptance* of those who have trouble doing what is ‘religious’ and ‘right’”<sup>1</sup>. This is the ground on which we stand as his followers, this is the script of our faith, but it makes us nervous, uncertain of our footing, especially if we carry responsibility for maintaining order in our religious assemblies. Religious leaders often feel they *dare not* tolerate deviance. What would happen to family values, the sanctity of marriage, showing a good example to the young, upholding the kind of morality that Paul was so fond of preaching, if we were to condone all sorts of loose living? That’s a real dilemma for churches – witness the Church of England’s on-going problem with gay marriage. The more religious we think we are, or *have* to be, the more vulnerable we are to being hurt or offended by the deviant actions of others, for they strike at the very heart of what we are trying to be. The Scribes and the Pharisees were offended by the woman who committed adultery, and they must have been *even more* offended by Jesus who questioned *their* righteousness and chose to show the woman mercy and offer her a new beginning by way of repentance.

Isaiah also reminds us that God isn’t very impressed by our attempts at righteousness. The prophet’s words were addressed to a people distressed by the absence of God, despite all their efforts at religious observance. The city of Jerusalem was in ruins: the nation had been fasting for

two months every year for seventy years as a sign of their prayer for its restoration, but God remained deaf, unmoved by their fasting. Isaiah receives God’s explanation and the instruction to shout it from the rooftops. The problem was, the people were demanding justice from God but there was no real practice of justice in that society: there was no compassion; no care for oppressed, the hungry, the homeless poor. Their fasting was a meaningless ritual, which had even divided them “from their own kin.” Perhaps this means that people had literally turned their backs on those close to them, concealing themselves behind a façade of piety; or perhaps they had forgotten that the Law they cherished was based from the very beginning on the two principles of love of God and love of neighbour (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18).

Isaiah warns us not to pay mere lip-service to our liturgy this morning, for receiving ashes on our faces will do us no good at all if our hearts are hardened towards the needs of those around us. We are entering what our liturgy calls a “desert of repentance,” forty days of reflecting on how we might be God’s people once again. This, we’re told, is a journey of discovery, “a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline” through which we hope to reconnect with the God we have offended by our sinfulness and our disregard for the welfare of others.

The promises of renewal are there in our reading from Isaiah: the promise of light breaking into our darkness like the dawn, of healing springing up quickly, of the glory of God shielding and protecting us. In this place of contrition, our prayers *will* be answered, for God *never* disregards a cry from a broken and a contrite heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, “Go Ahead! Throw the First Stone”! Meditation on Sin, the Fifth Sunday of Lent”





We wait sorrowfully and yet expectantly, and it's best if we don't anticipate anything precise, for when the light comes it will certainly arise in *unexpected* places.

In his poem *Ash Wednesday*<sup>2</sup> Louis Untermeyer describes how the light of heaven is banished from the church by false religion:

Shut out the light or let it filter through  
These frowning aisles as penitentially  
As though it walked in sackcloth

writes the poet. But sackcloth doesn't suit light, which the poet sees as an animated figure running away laughing,

Pulling the sun with him along the roads  
That shed their muddy rivers as he goads  
Each blade of grass the ice had flattened down.

Set free from every human effort to shroud or contain him, exuberant light touches and cajoles the dead land back to life:

He daubs the chestnut-tips with sudden reds  
And throws an olive blush on naked hills ...  
Who calls for sackcloth now?  
He leaps and spreads  
A carnival of colour, gladly spills  
His blood: the resurrection—and the light.

Today we ask God to create in us new and contrite hearts, so that the light of Christ may once more find its home in us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Untermeyer's poem, *Ash Wednesday* from *Burning Bush* (New York: Harcourt, 1928) can be read in full on-line at <https://tinyurl.com/2pl4nfoz>

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Our picture is the one taken by our friend Liz Crumlish to accompany the *Ash Wednesday 2023* thought on her blog, and can be seen in context at <https://tinyurl.com/569mdr6z>.