

Returning to God

Joel 2:12-17/2 Cor.5:20-6:2/Matt.6:16-21

Today is not the time for a long sermon. And even if it were, I think it would run counter to how we should think and act at the beginning of Lent. However hard a preacher tries to help people focus on God, he is likely to fail. He will make them focus on their own minds, if he tries to teach them, or worse still, to focus on himself, if he tries to entertain them. The message that began our Old Testament reading from Joel sums it all up:

'Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God.'

Three simple lessons then that follow from that challenge, one from each of our readings. To apply what Joel says to ourselves implies that we accept that we have wandered from the Lord our God. And although that is in a different way from the people to whom Joel was addressing his words, it is nonetheless accurate. Our love for God blows hot and cold, no doubt. Our discipleship waxes and wanes. That is the human condition, and we all stand further off from God than we might. I don't want to create guilt - but then I don't need to. We know that this is where we all are. The differences are only of degree. And Joel says that all must return. You remember that he commands the whole community to return - there is to be a solemn assembly, with everyone from elders to nursing infants present. The need to return to God is not only a personal and individual one, but a community matter as well. When we say the confession, we confess not only our personal sins of omission and commission, but those in which we share, by virtue of the place where we live, the race we belong to, the community of faith of which we are part. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, says Paul to the Romans. And we are part of that fallen humanity, however innocent we may be at a personal level - and that is unlikely to be an accurate description anyway. In every industrial dispute, in every civil action for damages, the search goes on for someone to blame. Joel says there is no member of the community who is guiltless, who does not need to return. Do we dare to say it is different for us? I think not.

If Joel tells us *who* is to return, Paul in our New Testament reading tells us *when* we are to return:

'Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation'

We all have little lists of things we want to get round to doing sometime or other. "I always meant to..." is one of humanity's great sayings. It goes without saying that it always implies that although the intention was there, somehow the action hasn't been taken - as yet, of course. Putting it off is usually quite innocent - but is as unproductive as if it were a deliberate refusal. The end result is the same. Lent provides us with an annual reminder that we have something we ought to do. And the fact that Lent

comes round every year is perhaps unfortunate. If we don't get round to using Lent to come closer to God this time - well, there will always be next year. But of course there may not be next year. DO IT NOW! must be a good motto for Christians. Maybe you have made some plans for how you are going to use Lent this year. If you haven't, that message is even more urgent.

So if Joel tells us that we all need to come back to God, and Paul tells us to do it now, our Gospel reading tells us a little of Jesus' advice on *how* we might do it. And he starts with negative advice - on how not to do it. Don't make a show of it, for a start. So when you are offered the chocolates that you have given up for Lent, or whatever it might be, don't say that is why you are refusing - just don't accept. The return to God doesn't involve telling other people. It is a private matter for you and God alone. There is no value, says Jesus in doing holy things for effect, or to make yourself seem good and holy and pious in other people's eyes. It is just for you and God to know about. Then he goes on to more positive advice. We are to store up treasure in heaven. How do we do that? Where do we make the deposits? There is a very direct reply to that which occurs four times in the gospels - Jesus tells his followers to sell all they have, give their money to the poor, and they will have treasure in heaven. So if we generalise from that, we are in the position of being asked to give sacrificially - and that might include not only money, but our time and our energy as well. That was how Jesus' first hearers would have understood this - the phrase "treasure in heaven" wasn't Jesus' invention.

They knew that the commandments were to love God, and then to love their neighbour as they loved themselves. The other sense in which they understood it was that your character was your treasure in heaven. You can't take money with you. As the Spanish proverb says "there are no pockets in a shroud". Coming closer to God means being better able to reflect him in the way we live - our character will shine as Moses face shone when he had been with the Lord. When we look at those two understandings of what it is all about, we tend to shy away. We know our giving is not all it might be whether we think of money or time or talents. We probably are not very good at loving other people as much as we are good at loving ourselves. And our character may have some Christ-like graces - but also has some aspects which are far from Christ-like too. Returning to God means being willing to face those home truths with some greater degree of honesty.

"Return to the Lord your God" - all of you, says Joel; now, says Paul; with genuine love and desire to be more Christlike, says Jesus. That is the challenge of this and every Lent. Thank God that with the challenge to return God also provides the strength, and that, like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, he comes out to meet us, and draw us back into his love.