

## Ash Wednesday 2019 Holy & Profane

Joel 2 vv 12-17 p912, Psalm 51, Matthew 6 vv 16-21 p970

*And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean.*  
Leviticus 10<sup>10</sup>.

I found this a difficult verse when I came across it in my daily readings a few days ago. A difference between holy and unholy? Surely our whole lives should be holy. We are the people of God, the people of the thrice holy God. He declares, *Ye shall be holy even as I am holy*. There ought to be nothing unholy in our lives.

I have often mentioned my conceptual difficulties with Lent. If we give up something bad for Lent, surely we shouldn't take it up again at Easter. Conversely, if we take up something good for Lent, we ought not to drop it at Easter.

We don't fast in order to obtain God's forgiveness for our sins. Forgiveness is God's free gift to us. Christ has paid the price on the Cross. What is required of us is faith and repentance. We can't earn our forgiveness by fasting or in any other way. If we deserved salvation, it wouldn't be a gift; it would be what God owes us. It's absurd to think that God could owe us anything. Everything we have is His gift to us.

Similarly, we don't fast in order to get God to answer our prayers as we would like. We can't bend God's Will to our will and just as well that we can't, given that He is infinitely wiser than we are. He knows what we need before we even ask. He knows what we need better than we know ourselves. Prayer is not changing God's Mind. Prayer is aligning our wills with His Will. Our prayers are an aspect of His eternal plan for our salvation and the salvation of those we pray for.

Fasting does open up new perspectives. It teaches us that we do not ultimately depend on material things, even food and drink. Our home is in heaven. People who fast intensively do report intense spiritual experiences. I am open minded about this and have not personally put it to the test.

Fasting may be a sign of our penitence, an expression of our devotion to God. For all I've said so far, Jesus expects His disciples to fast. Mark 2: 18 *And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*

But why times and seasons? Why holy days and ordinary days? What is special about Lent or the other seasons for which the liturgical colour is not green? Lent is a time of preparing for Easter and it is a good time in which to review our lives, to consider where we are going wrong and to ask God's forgiveness and help to do better. But surely we should be doing that all the time. The prayer book rightly says that *we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God*. St Paul is, to say the least, ambivalent about holy time. Colossians 2 v16: *Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come;*

*but the body is of Christ.* The teaching of Jesus on the Sabbath is also unclear to me. He condemns those who uncharitably make use of the Sabbath in order to show off their own religious superiority and try to prevent poor people from being blessed by Jesus on the holy days, but He does not abolish it. He simply says, *The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath*, but what did He mean? Surely, for many Christians, S James sums it up nicely, James 1 v27: *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

Maybe the answer is to be found if we think about Sunday observance. When I was growing up, and I expect it was true for many of you, there was a lot of debate about what it was appropriate to do on a Sunday. Playing cards was suspect. Playing cards for money was definitely a sin. Popular music was doubtful. Vulgar songs like *I'm Henry VIII<sup>th</sup> I am I am* were definitely out. Work was wrong, but not necessary work. But what is necessary work? The distinctions seemed quite arbitrary. There were those who simply got on with life, saying, *the better the deed, the better the day*. Those who kept Sunday special were subject to the same temptations as the Pharisees of Jesus' day – the temptation to think of ourselves as better than those who cleaned the car on a Sunday while we went to church and the unfairness, perhaps, of denying entertainment and recreation on Sundays to working people who had worked very hard from Monday to Saturday.

You could argue, and I think S Paul does, that it should be a matter of personal choice what one does about the sabbath and other holy days, not a rule imposed on everybody. We should not condemn those who come to different conclusions from our own on such matters. Romans 14 v4 *Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.* I think Paul would consider the more mature Christian as being the one who wasn't troubled by such observances. Every day ought to be holy, not just one day in seven. Yet the early Church did meet on the first day of the week, even at the risk of persecution, to share in the Eucharistic Feast, to hear the Word of God, to worship and pray together. To fail to do so was to let God down.

But where are we now? We've got rid of the arbitrary rules, the self-righteousness and the unfairness of the relatively leisured classes placing restrictions on how the hard-working poor could enjoy themselves, but now Sunday is no longer special. Very few people come to Church. Younger adults and children know little of the Christian faith. Christianity seems to be dying in this country. I think this is where Leviticus comes in. *And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy.* If we make no distinction between holy and unholy, the

tendency is that everything becomes unholy. If we say that every day is the same and Sunday isn't special, every day comes to be like a week day. If we say that we don't need special times for penitence because we always acknowledge our sins before God, there comes a time when in fact we don't acknowledge our sins at all. If we claim to be always thankful and always praying so that we don't need special times in the day for prayer and we don't need to come to church to pray, those daily prayer times get squeezed and our church attendance drops off until it hardly exists. If we make no distinction between holy and unholy, the unholy – the ordinary if you like – takes over. Our lives are just ordinary, nothing special, not specially holy – week days spelt either way.

The point about holy places like churches, the places where people come for prayer, and holy times, Sundays, the seasons of the Christian year revolving around the great feasts of Easter and Christmas, is that they sanctify ordinary time and ordinary places. By making the distinction between the holy and the not holy, we are brought back to what does it mean to be holy. The light shining in the holy place and at the holy times shows up the darkness of the ordinary for what it really is. *And although we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.* We ought always to be penitent, but we might never be penitent if we don't make space in our busy lives for being penitent specifically at a particular time and in a particular place, for example *when we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul,* when we come to Church or in our daily prayer time. In Lent, there is a special emphasis on penitence. At other seasons, on other holy days, the special emphasis is on other aspects of living a holy life. If we make a distinction between the holy and the unholy, if we make a point of a special time for prayer each day, a special time for common worship each week, a special time for reading God's special book, if we live our lives in accordance with the rhythm of the Christian year, what we keep as holy sanctifies our whole lives. If we don't consecrate the holy, the risk is that our whole lives become just ordinary, falling very far short of our calling to be the holy people of the thrice holy God.