



Ash Wednesday 2018: St. John's Shaughnessy

From the Prophet Joel:

Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love

Some years ago two journalists connected to a National Public Radio initiative called “StoryCorps” created a radio documentary entitled “Witness to an Execution.” This 20-minute radio documentary consists of the voices of an array of people who had either directly participated in or witnessed the execution of those condemned to death by lethal injection in the state of Texas in the 1990’s.

Last week while out running errands, I listened to this documentary in my car, and so, if you can believe it, while I was driving to get groceries and to pick up dry cleaning, I was hearing the voices of people who had participated in or witnessed over 100 executions: voices like the voice of the warden at the prison, the voices of two chaplains, the voices of those who escorted prisoners from their holding cells to the death chamber, the voices of various people who assisted in preparing the condemned man in death chamber, itself, and the voices of journalists who, along with family members of the victims or of the condemned man, were witnesses to the executions.

Listening to the documentary was horrifying and mesmerizing—horrifying to hear what the actual process was and is and mesmerizing to hear what people experienced as they drew nearer and nearer to their own or another’s death.

One chaplain recounted what he called the “indescribable” words that passed between him and condemned men in the minute or so before their deaths, in moments when no one else could listen to it: “It was always something different,” the chaplain said. “Like one man would say, ‘I want you to pray this prayer,’ and another would say ‘You know, I just want to tell you thank you.’ Or one man would say, ‘don’t forget to mail my letters.’ And another would say, ‘Just tell me again, is it gonna hurt?’ And then one of them said this to me, ‘what do I say when I see God?’”

Today, more than any day in the liturgical calendar, you and I draw near to our own deaths. This happens through the ashes imposed on our foreheads. This happens through the words “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” This happens through today’s readings that warn us not to squander our lives. And this happens through the chance we get to express our sorrow over the times we have indeed squandered it.

But unlike the so-called “condemned men” in the documentary I listened to last week, today we, you and I, are drawing near to the idea of our own deaths assured that we are in the presence of a God who does not condemn us, but instead offers us a love that will never let us down. We draw near to the idea of our own deaths in the presence of this loving God who asks something of us: to turn toward a life that fully expresses who we were meant to be in our relationships with ourselves, in our relationships with those closest to us and in our relationships to those we have yet to call our kin. And God asks something else of us: to consider any and every thing that is a barrier to the relational life we are meant to live and to see it for what it is: a stumbling block to our own wholeness and an impediment to the ministry of God that wants to flow through us to a world that languishes in diminishment, isolation and captivity.

Today, thanks be to God, you and I are not choosing a last meal, formulating last words, and preparing ourselves to say goodbye to everything and everyone we have known. We are not wrestling with those final, indescribable questions and issues that those condemned to death in this world must wrestle with. But what our Ash Wednesday readings do maintain is that today is critical to our wellbeing and to the wellbeing of the world where we have responsibility and influence.

Today is the time for each of us to put on the kind of urgency we would have as if it were our last day, not as one condemned but as one treasured and loved by the creator of the world. Today is the day, to re-examine the habits and, yes, the stuff we have learned to treasure that is of little worth in God’s sight because it doesn’t measure up to what we could be or what we could contribute.

And so today, join with me in and help me keep a Holy Lent, a time of prayer and fasting in order to make more room for the power of God in our lives, a time of turning away from false and unproductive patterns of behaviour in order to discover new ways of being and a time to prepare for the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, the celebration that God can and does raise up of new life within us all.