

## *Ash Wednesday*

*Glen Bengson*

RCL: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 LM: Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Lent recalls the foundation of our Christian discipleship, Jesus' death and resurrection. That discipleship lives through faith in God and serves the neighbor in Jesus' name. Lent historically has been a time of preparation for baptism. We enter the community of Christian faith and are daily renewed in faith through repentance, returning to the love of God and of neighbor so that we can serve hungry people and act justly in confidence and courage.

Throughout Lent sermons can focus on our ministry with and for hungry people, on God's justice in the world, on connecting Jesus' life of passionate commitment with our commitment to respond to human needs today. This integrates the Sunday texts, the seasonal unity, and the real life situations every congregation faces in its own community.

In my ministry for hungry people over the years, I have tried to keep at least six action areas in mind: prayer, charitable financial giving, volunteer participation, my own lifestyle habits, education, and advocacy. Each has its own importance and effect, and together they offer a holistic approach to just action on behalf of hungry people. Worship during Lent offers the context for these acts, equipping the congregation to go forth as disciples in the Lord's service to hungry and poor people.

As Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, we're reminded of our mortality: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." As the words are spoken, often the sign of the cross is marked on our forehead with ashes, recalling our baptism and inviting us into the Lenten discipline of repentance. I remember one baptism I performed involving a four year-old girl. When I visited the family sometime later, I asked if the child had mentioned anything of the experience. "Oh, yes," said the mother, "she would point to her forehead and tell me that the pastor made a cross there. I said that you couldn't see it anymore, and she said, 'But God can.'" Building on these memories and experiences in worship, we help children (and adults) realize what it means to be a child of God and how in trusting God we reach out to our neighbors in love, justice, and peace.

In the Ash Wednesday Gospel from Matthew, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the traditional disciplines God's people embrace— charity, prayer, and fasting. He cautions them against self-promotion, obviously assuming that his followers will exercise these practices of piety in their own faith life. "When you give alms . . . when you pray . . . when you fast," he says, fix your focus on honoring God, not yourself. We shape our piety to respond to the needs of others.

Giving alms seems fairly self-evident. We share with those in need the material blessings God has given us. Is Lent a good time to have a special emphasis on your church's hunger appeal offering? Studies show that our denominational hunger programs are among the most effective

ways to fund emergency relief, long-term development projects, and other efforts to help hungry people.

Surely we will undergird whatever we do with prayer—in worship, in our homes, and in personal devotional time. The section omitted from today’s assigned text, Matthew 6:7-15, is about the Lord’s Prayer. Sometimes what’s left out of the text is the most important to emphasize. A Lenten study or sermon series on prayer, based on the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, could begin on Ash Wednesday. Such a series, with the petition “Give us this day our daily bread” as its heart, would complement an emphasis on hunger. Intercessory prayer is a form of advocacy. We advocate for others before God and offer ourselves as instruments of justice and peace for God’s use.

If we focus on the tragedy of hunger, we can hardly forget the third discipline, fasting. Recent studies claim that 61 percent of United States citizens are overweight. But fasting in Scripture is about much more than controlling our poundage. It concerns our sense of dependence upon God to provide what we need. In Isaiah 58:1-12, “fasting” is an analogy to worship. Proper fasting, or worship, is acting justly toward others, freeing those in bondage, sharing bread with the hungry, and clothing the naked. When worship and action are complementary, God’s people witness with integrity and God’s intentions are fulfilled.

The last words of the Gospel text speak of establishing the proper “treasure.” Here I’m reminded of St. Lawrence, a martyred deacon in the third century, during the persecution under Valerian. Summoned to the throne and told to bring all the treasures of the church with him, Lawrence appears, surrounded by lepers, orphans, people who are blind and lame. “Here are the treasures of the church,” he says. In response, an outraged emperor has Lawrence killed. Where is our treasure, as individuals and as a Church? Will Lent, beginning with repentance on Ash Wednesday, help us identify once more what our heart treasures, where our confidence rests, and what disciplines of faith will help us live treasuring as God does?

### *Children’s Time*

If you have time with children in this service, consider teaching and distributing the following table blessings for use during Lent:

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blest. Blessed be God, who is our Bread; may all the world be clothed and fed.

—*Traditional Table Prayer*

Gracious God, give bread to those who are hungry; And to us, who have bread, give the hunger for justice.

### *Musical Suggestions*

Where Charity and Love Prevail—LBW 126 Praise and Thanksgiving—LBW 409 Son of God,

Eternal Savior—LBW 364 Arise, Your Light has Come!—WOV 652  
60 *Glen Bengson* Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love—WOV 765 (also BP 218) Let Justice Flow  
Like Streams—WOV 763 All Praise to You for Honored Souls—BP 80 Creator God, Who  
Gives the Earth—BP 191