

I wonder if you would take a moment to consider the last 2 years that we have just been through. Can you imagine if we hadn't been able to open our church buildings at all. Can you imagine having a lockdown that lasted a lot longer than we went through in the first lockdown. When we would return for this Ash Wednesday there would be cobwebs, damp would have moulded on the walls, David's mailbox outside would be packed with letters so much so that the postman has decided to even deliver any more. The bills having not been paid would mean the electricity would be turned off and so the whole building would be in darkness.

That kind of gives you a good idea of the state of Temple in Jerusalem when the prophet Joel was young. Centuries of misuse and disuse had caused Solomon's once magnificent structure to look more like a building in the slums than in the more upmarket part of Jerusalem. But then there was a turnaround. In Chronicles we read about how this building was cleaned up and refurbished. And after this restoration, the offerings and sacrifices were restored and Temple life returned to normal. Although not quite.

Joel wrote the words of our text because there was still a problem. The turnaround wasn't complete. Everything looked good on the outside, but there really hadn't been much of an internal change with these people. God wasn't looking for an outer change as much as he was looking for change on the inside.

And that's a good context for this Ash Wednesday, the first Ash Wednesday we have properly gathered for in over 2 years. God is looking for an inner change. That's what repentance is. He doesn't just want me to say all the right words, and he isn't interested in giving me a list of duties to work on when I get back home. Outward actions are nice, but if there is no inward change, it's really for nothing.

That neglected building that we talked about a minute ago, that church that no one took care of for the past 2 years, is us. If we were to take an honest look at our life, what do we see? And what is worth considering as our churches begin to see an increase in numbers again, can we say that during these past 2 years, we have been more interested in the things of God vs the things of this world? In just this past week, can I honestly say that the Lord has always taken first place in my heart, or has he sort of slipped through the cracks as other priorities crowded God out? I've already said that this year is to re-evaluate, to strip back, or another word that has been coming to me in my reading is the word 'simplify', because the busyness of life can mean a great neglect within us for our personal walk with God. Have we allowed the cobwebs to grow over.

Our reading today shows that God has something to say to people who haven't been the most faithful followers of him. Ash Wednesday is a perfect day to do some housecleaning in our hearts as we journey through Lent. Our reading today makes it very clear in the word "Return!" If you've been away from the Lord for a while, or if you haven't followed him as vigorously as you know you should, God is holding out an invitation to you "Return! I want you back!". Verse 13 of our reading God says "rend your hearts and not your clothing".

Back in Bible times, if you were really upset over something, you would tear your clothes as a sign of sadness. But many of the people played a little game with God. When they were

confronted with their sin by God's priests and prophets, they would tear their clothes, they would put ashes on their heads. They'd do everything that made them look sad, and then they would go back to those same sins. It's actually something of the joke that Lent has become in the secular world. Many people will give up chocolate for Lent, but then on Easter Sunday they will dive into that Easter Egg and eat themselves stupid on chocolate. Therefore what was the point of giving something up if it was only to return back to it after 40 days. This period of Lent needs to be far more than just an exercise for 40 days after which we return to the way we were.

For the past 6 weeks, Alison and I have met online with clergy couples across Ireland, north and south, to enrich one another in our marriage. And it reminds me today that marriage is a lifelong commitment. It's cannot be a partial commitment. A partial faithfulness is really no faithfulness. When God invites us to return to him, he wants it all. God wants our whole lives. 40 days isn't a commitment. The Lord wishes us to serve him 7 days a week. That is what the prophet Joel means when he refers to "returning to the Lord with all our heart."

When people consider the language of sin or repentance, it feels very directed and personal. And yes it is that, but we are in good company because everyone of us, no one excluded is under the weight of sin. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But our reading today shows us the love and mercy of the Lord in all of this through the opening words of verse 12. It says "Yet even now". There is always time for all to come back to God. Irrespective of a person's past, the Lord still loves and wants them. In fact there is incredible rejoicing when a person chooses to follow God. Luke 15:10 says that 'there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents'. And because of Jesus, our sins are forgiven.

As we take our steps toward the cross of Jesus this Lent, we learn how God can afford to declare us innocent. While we deserve punishment, Jesus took our place. God transferred our guilt to his innocent Son Jesus. Here we learn why we love Jesus so much: because he gave every bit of himself to us.

So today at the beginning of Lent, let's get rid of the clutter. Your Christian life resembles a building that needs some upkeep, and Lent is the time to get to work with the intention of not allowing it to be neglected after these 40 days. The Lord wants you to turn to him. He will give you the power to do just that. He will point you to his Son Jesus, and remind you that though this life is a struggle, Jesus won the ultimate struggle for you. He has fixed you up, and made you that glistening, beautiful building in which will dwell forever. God has made you into a building like that, and now with the Spirit's help, strive to keep that building kept up! Don't be satisfied with mere cosmetic improvements, but beg the Lord to use the power of his word to change your heart to make you a more repentant, more useful servant in God's kingdom. Return to him.