

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 22, 2012

Joel 2:12-18

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Hearing this Gospel every year on Ash Wednesday has surely impressed it on our minds as one of the most important teachings of Jesus, but I'm not sure we give it quite the attention that it merits. I say this because at the recent meeting of American abbots our guest speaker was the metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in America and some of our guests were Catholics of one or another of the Eastern rites. Although the Eastern Orthodox and the Eastern Catholics differ on some important points of doctrine, especially their understanding of the papacy, their spirituality is quite similar. One of the leaflets they provided for each of us had the impressive statement that the three practices we just heard about in the Gospel—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—are actually regarded as *the pillars* of Byzantine Christian practice. I doubt that many of us in the Roman rite would make such a statement. At the very least, it is surely worth saying something about each of the three practices here at the beginning of Lent.

In his chapter on Lent, St. Benedict twice mentions prayer, saying first that one of the best Lenten practices is to devote ourselves to “prayer with tears” as a way of washing away the negligences of other times, and then going on to say that we should “add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink” (RB 49.4-5). There is, of course, a tendency for us to think that because of the pressure of our various jobs there just isn't much time for prayer, especially any that goes above and beyond the bare minimum. Here we can learn from some of the greatest figures in both ecclesial and civil life.

When Pope John Paul II was on his many travels, members of his entourage readily excused themselves from their normal practice of prayer, so tiring were the journeys and meetings that they endured day after day. More than once, however, when most of his staff were already in bed, someone would step into the chapel of the place they were staying and find the pope lying face down on the floor in prayer before the tabernacle. We can also learn from the example of a great civil leader, Abraham Lincoln. Although not a member of any particular denomination, he had an abiding faith and trust in God. Not long ago, I read that “even in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln would spend an hour each afternoon, sitting in his rocking chair on the porch of the White House It was during this time of thinking, praying and meditating that Lincoln came up with his greatest ideas. Because of the quiet time, [he] was able to bring ... some peace to the most chaotic time of our nation's history. In the rush of his day, Lincoln knew there had to be a place of peace.”¹

The next practice, fasting. A few nights ago, in our reading at the beginning of Compline, we heard some fine words from St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who said that “when we fast, [we] give up wine and meat not because we detest them, as though using them were a crime, but because we are hoping for an eternal reward. We willingly go without things that please the senses in order to be able to enjoy the pleasures of the spiritual table.... [So, he concluded,] if you abstain from those foods, do not do so as if they were unclean. Rather think of them as a good thing which you are content to give up for love of a far greater spiritual benefit.”² That is surely the

correct way to regard fasting and abstinence from certain kinds of food and drink, but the Scriptures tell us that there is an even more important kind of fasting, namely, fasting from attitudes and behaviors to which we might indeed be quite attached but that in fact are drawing us away from God. Tonight at Vespers, the reading is from Pope Leo the Great and is on precisely this point. To give you a brief preview (and some of us will not even be here to hear it because of an important meeting in the school), Pope Leo once said in a Lenten sermon: “Our fast does not consist chiefly of mere abstinence from food, nor are dainties withdrawn from our bodily appetites with profit unless the mind is recalled from wrong-doing and the tongue restrained from slandering.... Now let godly minds boldly accustom themselves to forgive faults, to pass over insults, and to forget wrongs.” Easier said than done, no doubt, but surely the best kind of fasting we could ever undertake. As a modern spiritual writer has said, “Our greatest pain in life is not really the hurtful things that have happened to us in the past, but it is the holding on to those past hurts that creates the greatest suffering.”³

And finally, almsgiving. I’ve always felt that one can learn a great deal about a word by knowing where it comes from. This word “alms” is from the Greek word *eleos*, meaning “mercy” or “pity,” whose verb form we have used for years in the prayer *Kyrie, eleison*: “Lord, have mercy.” We have mercy on the poor and needy when we give them food, money, or other goods, but we also have mercy on them when we give them of our time. At a recent roundtable meeting of our Oblates that I also attended, their Prior told the group that it was probably easier for most of them to donate some money to the monastery than to donate any of their time. I dare say all of us can readily understand his point. There may indeed be occasions when we truly cannot give another person the time that he or she requests, but often our plea that “I just don’t have time right now” is not in accord with that generous self-giving that we find modeled in so many of the saints and in Jesus himself. Jesus did, after all, rebuke his disciples when they tried to turn away the people bringing their young to Jesus that he might touch them. The disciples were presumably trying to get Jesus some peace and quiet, but that was not his way: “Let the children come to me and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). May our own Lenten practice be marked with such generosity, not only in our almsgiving but also in our prayer and various kinds of fasting.

Abbot James Wiseman

1

Mark Burger, *Hearing God's Voice* (n.p., 2009), 319.

2

* Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, 4, 27ff., in *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary*, ed. Thomas Spidlik (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 75.

3

* Burger, 276.