

Worship in the Wilderness

Ash Wednesday

Read: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

1 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand— 2 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come.

12 “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” 13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. 16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. 17 Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Some thoughts:

Tearing your clothes is an ancient Jewish practice for times of mourning. Even today, Jews engage in *keriah*, the Hebrew verb for “rip” or “rend”. Although a very dramatic event in the Old Testament (for example, Jacob tearing his clothes upon being told of Joseph’s violent death in Genesis 37), today’s *keriah* is regulated by rules around who needs to tear what is allowed to be mended. A spontaneous expression of grief has been packaged neatly into a box of rules.

Every faith or culture will have customs and rules surrounding mourning. Black used to be the colour of choice for funeral services, signifying the seriousness, respect and sobriety of the occasion. This rule has been softened somewhat, as black becomes the go-to colour for rock stars, fashion designers and intense teenagers alike. Yet most of us would still think seriously about what to wear for a funeral, foregoing the sequined party dress for something more discreet.

It is interesting to think about mourning in the context of prayer and spirituality. The prophet Joel encourages the people of Israel to engage with practices usually associated with funerals or wakes, but to use them in the context of drawing near to God.

Reflection:

Do you have experiences of mourning? How do you feel about expressing grief before God?

As Christians in the time after Jesus we might think that we do not have to bother with awe and trembling any more. The writer to the Hebrews, however, reminds us that even as Christians we are to “worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’” (Hew. 12:28-29) Let us try to shake off our over-familiarity with this holy, awe-inspiring, righteous God, and linger for a while in the picture with Joel presents to us:

“Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming.” (v.1)

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” (v. 12)

“Rend your heart and not your garments.” (v. 13)

In most of our contemporary worship we celebrate, sing joyful songs and greet one another with a smile and a hope for peace. But before a holy, righteous God, ought we to sometimes come in weeping and mourning? For example, when we consider our own role in the textile trade, requiring sweatshop workers in Bangladesh to live inhuman lifestyles, perhaps weeping is the appropriate response? When the nation we live in sells weapon to other nations, which use them to oppress the poor, ought we to come before God in mourning? When we lie to our dear ones again and again, ought we to repent to God? And we will all know the pride, the selfishness and the secret sins which dirty our own hearts and cause God pain.

The ash of Ash Wednesday signifies the truth that we will all one day return to dust (see Genesis 3:19) and is a call for us to repent while there is still time. Joel reminds us that, rather than a big show of repentance, God wants the true repentance of our hearts. Use the space below to reflect on your own heart: is there anything there which requires a mournful repentance?



Pray: Write or draw your prayer in this ash.