

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer
Prof John Morris, Sunday 1st March

1. *Prayers of penitence* : Psalms 4 & 31; Chapter 1: Thou O Lord; Collects: 1,2,3

Welcome to the first of these Lent Complines. In these short addresses before the service we are going to focus on different aspects of prayer - one of the topics Bishop Colin recommends. Lent has traditionally been the time of penitence for the church. So today we start thinking about penitence in prayer; on the next two Sundays we'll look at OT prayers for God to show his power (e.g. Elijah) and for salvation (e.g. Daniel in lion's den). On March 22nd I thought we'd consider Jesus' instructions on prayer, and follow that with Jesus' hard command to "pray for those who persecute you". On Palm Sunday it seems appropriate to consider prayer as praise, then in holy week we'll give detailed consideration to The Lord's Prayer, in Sung compline on Tuesday Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, and on Wednesday the prayer of Jesus on the Cross.

So, today, at the start of Lent - prayers as penitence. Lent has traditionally been attached to and preceded Easter, as a principal occasion for baptism and for the reconciliation of those who had been excluded from the church's fellowship by sin. This explains the characteristic notes of Lent - self-examination, penitence, self-denial and preparation for Easter.

But it is not negative, although often mistakenly thought to be exclusively so. Rather it should be positive - a time of healing; healing that has the prerequisite of penitence. An old Latin prayer dated around 1100 goes "Now is the healing time decreed, for sins of heart and wound and deed, when we in humble fear record, the wrong that we have done the Lord". So, as candidates for baptism (originally all adults) and the penitents to be readmitted to the worshipping church considered their previous lives, the whole Christian community was invited to join with them in study and repentance for 40 days - a period chosen to remind them of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

Lent started on Ash Wednesday and, since the middle ages, it has been the custom for worshippers to be marked in ash with the sign of the cross as a sign of individual penitence. Ashes are an ancient sign - ashes on the head, sitting in ashes. But this sign has a very long origin, and one which did not originally - so far as I can tell - have the connotation of penitence. Dictionaries state that sackcloth and ashes have long been signs of penitence, remorse, mourning, but it was the last of these - mourning - with which it was first associated. Wearing sackcloth - a very coarse fabric made from goat's hair or camel's hair (which is terribly itchy and uncomfortable) and literally covering oneself with ashes, showed that the person was enduring a most terrible disaster.

Sackcloth was first woven in Mesopotamia, where Abraham originated. The first mention of sackcloth is in Genesis. When Jacob the patriarch heard that Joseph - his favourite son - had apparently been killed (having been presented with the bloodied coat of many colours) "Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned his son for many days."

Ashes appear first in the bible as the ashes of the burnt offerings in the very early chapters of the OT. But what about their use in mourning? In the book of Esther (not often read), Haman (the king's vizier), because of a perceived slight from a Jew named Mordecai, gets an order from the king for the murder of all the Jews. Mordecai then 'rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes', fearing disaster. A more familiar story is in Job 2. You will remember that Job was a perfect, upright, god-fearing man. At a meeting (which the OT makes sound like a sort of heavenly council meeting), God says to Satan (rather proudly one feels) "have you considered how my servant Job continues as a perfect man although you, Satan, try to destroy him without cause" to which Satan replies "That's OK, but if you touch his bone and flesh, he will curse you to your face", so God allows Satan to smite Job (there's a lot of 'smiting' in the OT) with "sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" and Job "sat down among the ashes". But Job has done nothing needing repentance.

The element of repentance seems to appear first in Daniel 9:3 where the prophet prepares himself by fasting and donning sackcloth and ash, "confesses all the sins of the people" and prays to God for mercy. The sackcloth and ashes enable him to appear sufficiently humble before God, giving him an attitude of proper sorrow and repentance. You'll have noticed too

that, in this passage, sackcloth and ashes are linked with fasting - something that remains in various forms in Lent.

Sackcloth and ashes also feature in Greek mourning culture at the time but, interestingly, as in the earlier old testament texts, there was little link with repentance and confession.

Returning to the old testament Isaiah 66:2 God says he will hear those of a contrite spirit and Joel 2:13 exhorts "Rend your hearts and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness". (As an aside, I wonder if, in the present-day stress on God's loving goodness towards us and care for us, we have rather neglected the anger of God toward all our 'sins and wickedness').

What we see in the old testament is, therefore, a gradual transition from the practice of rending clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes to denote mourning some disaster that has or is about to befall, to penitence and remorse for our own actions when we have fallen short of God's will for us.

The New Testament has little reference to sackcloth and ashes, but a similar passage in both Matthew and Luke has Jesus say, when he had appointed seventy followers to go in pairs throughout the land healing and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, that towns where their message was not received should "repent, sitting in sackcloth and ashes".

Repentance is certainly a central message of the New Testament, starting with John the Baptist. At the start of Mark's gospel we read that, to prepare the way for Christ, "John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins ... and the people of Judaea and Jerusalem were baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins". So now we have both repentance and confession. And what was John the Baptist wearing when he preached this message? None other than a coat of camel's hair - i.e. sackcloth. And when John was imprisoned, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching "the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel."

Mediaeval monastic tradition used the wearing coarse hair shirts to 'mortify the flesh' especially during Lent and in Holy Week, but this practise has largely died out as we concentrate more on internal aspects of repentance. Similarly, wording and emphasis continue to change to the present day. In 1662, the Book of Common Prayer, the General Confession has us "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness .. provoking most justly God's wrath and indignation"; "We do earnestly repent our sins", but the prayer then goes back to the self-flagellating "the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable". Various revisions in the 20th century are much more familiar to us. They stress the mercy more than the anger of God, though some still refer to us as "miserable offenders".

The prayer of penitence which we now use week by week, addresses God as "giver of light and grace", says that we are "sorry, ashamed and repent" and asks for forgiveness, but then ends with the more affirmative asking God to "lead us to walk as children of light". Most confession of specific sins is usually done in private or to God alone in our prayers. We certainly pray the words of repentance every week in our service (and how easy it is to repeat those words parrot-fashion without really thinking about what they really mean!). No-one is suggesting that we should spend all our time "mourning our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness". Such a preoccupation is, I suggest, sinful because it makes us self-obsessed rather than thinking about what our Christ-given mission is to those with whom we come into contact day by day. Lent is undoubtedly a very useful time for self-examination. It is a human self-protective trait that most of us are very good at thinking the best of ourselves, 'giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt' ("dissembling or cloaking our sins before the face of almighty God"). Christ's message was always positive, not negative. It was not that he downplayed the effects of sin, but that he offered to his listeners then, and offers to us now, a way to move forward. I'll end with the example of the woman taken in adultery in John. The law condemned her to be stoned to death, but after her accusers had slunk away having been reminded of their own sin, Jesus says to her "I don't condemn you (to death) either; go, and sin no more." That surely is the real take-home message of our penitential observance of Lent.