

5th Sunday of Lent

“From ashes to the living font” depicts the journey of Lent. At the Easter Vigil Bishop Johnston will conduct our elect to the living font of baptism. Their journey has taken them from their past life to a full Christian life as members of the Body of Christ. Each year all of us journey from sin to grace, beginning with ashes to acknowledge our sinfulness and remember that we won’t live forever: We are dust and to dust we shall return. We spend six weeks doing penance, asking God to forgive our guilt and grant us new life through the sacraments of reconciliation and the holy eucharist.

By week five, some of us are deep into our Lenten observances, anxious for the days to pass by. Others realize they haven’t done very much and have compounded their sense of sin with a lazy Lent. We can all remember the remorse that motivated us to acknowledge our sin on Ash Wednesday.

Psalm 130 helps us do that well. It presumes we are guilty of sin but, in a helpful way, it focuses more on God than on us. “With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.” The psalm in fact prays, “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” God does not hold our guilt against us. How different this is from the way humans treat one another. When someone offends us, we often hold the anger tight, refusing to forgive. We tell others about the hurt someone inflicted, rather than share a balanced view of the same person that includes their goodness. After all, that’s how we believe God looks at us. Even if we have not sufficiently repented of our sins, we have confidence that God finds something within us to love and forgives. This belief is reasonable, but it should also form our attitude toward others as well.

The lectionary gives us Psalm 130 today under the most dramatic of circumstances. In preparation for Jesus’ greatest miracle, the raising of Lazarus from death to life, foreshadowing his own resurrection from death to new life, we hear from the prophet Ezekiel. Using the metaphor of a cemetery, God promised to open the social graves of his people who had spent most of their lives in exile, having abandoned their covenant with God. Now God was bringing them back from that place of death to their homeland. With that story in the background, the lectionary offers us a later prayer, Psalm 130, which famously opens with its own metaphor, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” We can imagine Lazarus singing those words from the depths of his grave, Israel singing those words from the depths of its exile, and each of us singing them from the depths of our own sin. True remorse for our sins can affect our mood, our vocabulary, our decisions, our activities—we may despair of ever winning again the favor of someone we love. We may feel as though we are “in the depths.” But that bleakest metaphor comes with the greatest reassurance: “I long for you, O Lord. My soul longs for his word. My soul hopes in the Lord more than watchmen for daybreak.” If we are patient, the Lord will come with forgiveness of our sins.

If you were hoping to make this Lent a time of renewal, a time to break bad habits, to practice good new habits, or to take a step on the path of forgiving someone else, there is still time. Like Lazarus in the tomb, like Israel in exile, like any believer in the depths of sin and rejection, forgiveness of sin and mercy can always be found with the Lord.

Sunday, March 26, 2023