



## Ash Wednesday 6th March 2019

Almighty and everlasting God,  
you hate nothing that you have made  
and forgive the sins of all those who are  
penitent:

create and make in us new and contrite hearts  
that we, worthily lamenting our sins  
and acknowledging our wretchedness,  
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,  
perfect remission and forgiveness;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

	<b>Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17</b>	<b>OT p. 861</b>
or	Isaiah 58: 1-12	OT p. 698
	Psalms 51: 1-18 may be used	OT p. 531
	<b>2 Cor. 5: 20b – 6: 10</b>	<b>NT p. 17</b>
	Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21	NT p. 5
or	<b>John 8: 1-11</b>	<b>NT p. 97</b>
	(NIV used in sermon preparation)	

I suppose that I should not be surprised that in the main more people are happy to celebrate Shrove Tuesday as a worldly excuse for food ~ renaming it Pancake Day ~ than they are to acknowledge the solemn Service of the Imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday. Most of society does not even realise that the two should be linked and has lost the relevance of clearing the riches from the larder on the Tuesday evening, in a pancake feast, as the preparation for today and the 40 days of Lent which follow! So thank you for being here.

The church does not help of course ~ when was the last time we celebrated Shrove Tuesday with a pancake party here at Immanuel? We should programme it in for next year and get everyone to bring the ingredients to share!

In missing the point of both days, importantly, working together ~ are we missing the message of the season that we are entering in to? I suspect that we are!

Unlike the worlds promotion of Lent being a time to give something up as some sort of discipline of self denial ~ Lent is really about taking time to make space to come closer to God, recognising how little time we have actually spent with Him in the past year and doing something to

put it right. That, of course, might mean setting something aside ~ the giving something up ~ to make the room and time to come closer to God ~ but that is different from giving something up for the sake of it and hoping it will somehow make us a better person or improve our spirituality. Let me tell you it won't!

There are various readings set for this evenings preparation for Lent and tonight I chose Joel and John to work alongside the passage in 2 Corinthians. Let me try to explain why I see them working together, offering us guidance and reason .

In his 2nd letter to the church in Corinth Paul talks about being ambassadors for Christ ~ that is ~ God making Himself known through us. We can only mirror God in our Lives; live in a Christ like way if we are well fed ~ nourished through the Word of God. If we take time to discover and rediscover what that Word has to say to us we rediscover who God wants us to be! Paul calls that being reconciled to God. When we are reconciled to God we can be co-workers and being reconciled means that we do not take God's Grace in vain. We need to recognise God's blessings and constantly thank Him for them in our prayer and praise. More ~ we need to live within God's provision which includes His armour and the gifts and fruits of the spirit. We may be poor in the worlds eyes but we will make many rich and, through Christ possess everything ~ becoming spiritually rich ourselves.

Joel is told by God to let the people know that they must be ready for the return of the Lord by returning to Him with all their heart. ~ "Even Now", he says ~ in other words it is never too late! So we need to know how we can be ready for His return ~ we find the clues in God's Word.

God says rend your hearts and not your garments ~ coming closer to God is not an outward showy thing but a quiet, private part, of discipleship that eventually will be noticed by others in the changes in us. However, we can blow the trumpets to declare a holy fast ~ except we didn't take the opportunity to do that yesterday! But some of us have come together this evening to ask God's mercy on His people ~ to remember we are God's creation and our freewill enables us to turn away from Him rather than walking with Him. All who believe should come together, putting God first, so that those who do not believe cannot say of us "Where is their God?". We should show them 24/7 where our God is. On Sunday we will hear that the Word is near us ~ it is in our mouths and our hearts. So in theory we cannot do anything but show God in our lives and we need to pay attention to

what we are revealing of the God we believe in ~ revealing what it is a true reflection of His Word and Love ~ not necessarily an image of God that will make us popular!

John writes of Jesus being set a trap by the teachers of the law and Pharisees. They bring a woman caught in adultery before Him, knowing that the Law Moses said such sinners should be stoned and, as a descendant of Moses, ~ as a Jew, and as a Rabbi, Jesus should be upholding the Law. Jesus' divinely given response is obedient to the Law of Moses ~ but obedient to its essence not its literal misinterpretation and application! ~ Sinners cannot punish sinners ~ it is not for man to judge but for God. So after making them wait for His Response, Jesus tells then that whoever is without sin can throw the first stone. They, like you and me, knew they were sinners and one by one they moved away. Then, when Jesus and the woman are alone a very important short dialogue passes between them. Jesus asks has anyone condemned her and she answers no. Jesus then tells her that He will not condemn her either! Jesus ~ the only sinless human ~ the one Person, as God incarnate, ~ who could condemn the woman choses not to do so! That is the extreme of God's love that is offered to all of us. God will not condemn us but will forgive us. To be forgiven we need to recognise the traps that the world sets for us and those we set for ourselves and bring them to God ~ that is rending our hearts.

Ash Wednesday is about beginning the time of examining all that we could be condemned for ~ rending our hearts ~ and knowing that we will receive forgiveness. It is about laying all before God and relying on His grace. And it is about moving on discarding anything that we have disclosed in rending our hearts so that we do not repeat but are able to start afresh.

Tonight, as we worship we pray that all of God's church at Immanuel will have the opportunity in the next 40 days to understand how to rend their hearts as we are beginning to do this evening. And for starters we have the privilege of coming before God on behalf of all of our worshipping community and seeking to know how to reflect this aspect of His love to them. So let today be the day you give up who you've been for who you can become ~ making space to reach your full potential in Christ and encourage others to do the same. Amen.