

Sermon 14th February 2024,
Ash Wednesday
19.30, Holy Communion,
All Saints' Cottenham
Isaiah 58.1-12 and John 8.1-11
Alison Wedgbury, LLM

Every now and then in the church calendar there are some weird and wonderful coincidences. Today, 14th February 2024, is Ash Wednesday, a day to start the annual period of Lent, to focus on prayer, fasting and self-denial.

It's also Valentine's Day, a day for cards and heart-felt messages. A day about love, old love, new love, love that may be obvious, love that may be a surprise.

But can Ash Wednesday also be all about love? Well, the clue is right there in our printed service sheet if we to read it backwards so to speak. Right at the end, just after communion and before we go home with the sign of the cross on our foreheads, Lynda will say, and we will respond:

This is love, not that we loved God
But that he loved us and sent his Son.
He is the sacrifice for our sins
That we might live through him.
If God loves us so much
We ought to love one another.
If we love one another
God lives in us.

That message of love, believe it or not, is in both tonight's Bible readings, though they take a bit of unpacking.

The Gospel story is about a woman taken in adultery. Jesus saves her from being killed and makes his audience think differently. There's a lot in this story that we might want to discuss, but just for tonight, one central message is key for us today, especially on Ash Wednesday at the start of Lent. It's about acting against what God wants for the world. It's about recognising how we hurt others, maybe hurting those we still love. It's also about what can happen when we judge other people. It's about recognising the reality of sin.

Just before communion in this service tonight we will say some powerful words about sin. Together we will recognise that Jesus can take on our sins and give us peace. In the end, it's about forgiveness, for ourselves and for others.

As one commentator writes:

Being forgiven doesn't mean that sin doesn't matter. On the contrary, forgiveness means that sin does matter but God is choosing to set it aside.

And what can we make of the first reading tonight, the Isaiah words about the right relationship between the Jewish people and God?

It's significant that Jesus used that passage from Isaiah in his first recorded sermon. Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus stood up in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and read out exactly the words from Isaiah that we have heard tonight. So Isaiah first, then Jesus much later, preached about spiritual practices and how they match up, or do not match up, to our human actions with each other. In Isaiah, spiritual practices mean following the guidance of the Spirit of God into the right kind of actions in life.

What do spiritual practices mean today? The fact that we have come together tonight for this church service is one very important spiritual practice. Other practices include praying, singing, fasting in some way, reading the Bible, having ashes put on our foreheads and much else. But they are not the end in themselves. They all need to lead to right ways of interacting with other people in our communities.

According to Isaiah, and of course Jesus, God wants us to:

*Loose the bonds of injustice
Share our bread with the hungry
Stop pointing an accusing finger at others*

That may be about doing something that we don't much want to do or feel like doing. It may mean helping people we don't much like. The message of the Isaiah passage is that God really does care about the decisions we make and the actions that we do. God wants us to keep doing those things, not just on a Sunday and not just after special services like tonight's.

So, back to Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day in 2024. What are the parallels? Well, some Valentine's cards have deep words in them. Here are some:

I know loving me isn't always the easiest. But trust me, I'm worth it.

Whenever I feel like giving up, your love keeps me going.

If those words were in a church service, perhaps they would be a form of prayer to God. Perhaps they would get close to our admission of spiritual weakness, our need for forgiveness and our need to trust God. Perhaps they would come close to what we might say to God at any time.

Finally one Valentine's card message that struck me as what God says to us in return:

I met you.

I love you.

I'm keeping you.

God's love for us gets us through all the times we get things wrong and cry out for help. As Isaiah puts it:

You shall cry for help and God will say 'Here I am'

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places.

The words in our Ash Wednesday service really are remarkable. They cover nearly everything about our relationship with God.

This service tonight reminds us that God always has the last word.

Amen.