

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018

Joel 2:12-18; Ps 51:3-4, 5-6AB, 12-13, 14 and 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18



by Dale S. Recinella, JD, MTS



Modern pop-wisdom insists upon choosing between mercy for the so-called worthy and unmitigated punishment for the others. Our faith heritage scoffs at such self-condemning moral ignorance; and instead reminds us that before God all are unworthy, even those who are esteemed by the world.

Our cultural misperception of reality is not new. 2400 years ago, the prophet Joel was facing this problem. The people of Judah had lapsed into a self-indulgent, me-first society. Then, suddenly they were besieged by a plague of locusts that threatened to destroy every living thing in Judah. Mass starvation was imminent.

Joel responds by calling the people of Judah to get back on track with God's program, warning that their insolence and self-righteousness before God has brought this judgment upon them (JL 2:12-18). He calls their plight the Day of the Lord. This message of doom is tempered with the promise of God's mercy, but only if the people repent and soften their hearts to the will of God, who is quick to forgive and shower mercy upon God's people.

Our reading tells us that God did not scream, "Three strikes and you're out!" God did not dismiss their repentance as "crocodile tears." God did not disdain their lamentations as "only trying to save their own skin." Fortunately, God did not respond like many of us would to a habitual offender today. Instead, God took pity on the people of Judah. The Day of the Lord was itself transformed from an event of apocalyptic horror to a hallmark of God's merciful and saving grace for those who repent and reform.

It is also fortunate for David that God does not act like we do. The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that David had committed at least two offenses subject to capital punishment under Hebrew law: adultery and murder. Yet, when David begs for mercy, God does not respond "eye for an eye!" God does not scream "Take your punishment like a man!" No. God's response is consistent with the handling of the murderer Moses and the murderer Saul (Paul). God forgives and restores the repentant David.

In our reading from the Epistles, the reformed murderer Paul makes it explicitly clear that we are to be ambassadors, not of revenge, but of Christ's gift of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:20). And we are to do so now, today, for "now is the Day of the Lord."

Finally, our Gospel reading is taken from the section of Matthew that Pope Paul VI called the Magna Carta of the Kingdom of God (chs. 5, 6 and 7). Jesus' words warn us to avoid showy reality-tv style repentance. True repentance takes place between the individual and God (Mt 6:1). The proof is not in the number of viewers. It is in the changed life humbly lived in accordance with God's will. God is the only Viewer that matters.

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