

Wednesday, 14th February, 2018
Year B - Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2,12-17 OR Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-21

In the name of God; Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier

The Desert Fathers tradition tells this story...

A brother fell when he was tempted, and in his distress he stopped practising his monastic rule. He really longed to take it up again, but his own misery prevented him. He went to see one of the old men, and told him all.... And when the old man (saw) his distress, he said: 'There was a man who had a plot of land; but it got neglected and turned into waste ground, full of weeds and brambles. So he said to his son, "Go and weed the ground." The son went off to weed it, saw all the brambles and despaired. He said to himself, "How long will it take before I have uprooted and reclaimed all that?"

So he lay down and went to sleep for several days. His father came to see how he was getting on and found he had done nothing at all. "Why have you done nothing?" he said. The son replied, "Father, when I started to look at this and saw how many weeds and brambles there were, I was so depressed that I could do nothing but lie down on the ground." His father said, "Child, just go over the surface of the plot.. every day... and you will make some progress."

So he did, and before long the whole plot was weeded.' The old man said to the young man... 'The same is true for you, brother: work just a little bit... without getting discouraged, and God by his grace will re-establish you.'

Some seventeen hundred years later... here we go again! Another Ash Wednesday... the start of another Lent. And we look at the garden of our lives... and yet again they are not the picture we would like to see... full of weeds and brambles... again!

I guess you've noticed... how the seasons of the church's year repeat over and over again? They never really change. Our faith says to us... nothing in this life is ever done 'once and for all'. We return over and over again. There is always more to be done. Our journey of faith is like a spiral - we travel ever deeper, and yet we always return to the same place again... well that's how it feels at least.

Yes, we perhaps did get somewhere last year, but there's always deeper to travel, always more to be attended to... and some things in our life are remarkably stuck and resistant to change. And even if we are getting somewhere, we come past that same place over and over again. Another Ash Wednesday, another Lent, and once more the garden is messy. and we look despairingly at the work to be done; again!

Rowan Williams, perhaps the greatest Theologian of our time, had the courage to call it boring! 'This repetitive struggle is boring!!!' He said this is the "toughest challenge of spirituality" - not giving up; not 'going to sleep on the job'; "not acting as if the problem of myself will just go away or solve itself or get fixed by a new environment..." This is my messy garden and God is asking me to attend to it.

Williams contrasts the honesty of our tradition, (repeating over and over again), with the fantasy of many self-help books, which seem to promise once-and-for-all solutions... quick fixes (often)... so that the hard and painful stuff of life can be 'dealt with' immediately and never have to be faced again.

But Rowan says, "The guidance we need is not so much how to greet everything with spiritual joy and excitement, but how to preserve the quiet motivation to keep our eyes open..."... how to face up to the messy garden of our life... yet again... how to persevere in the struggle for wholeness.

Personally... I think that as we age, the temptation to 'give up' or 'go to sleep' strengthens and becomes even more of an issue. It is so tempting to give-up on ourselves - "I'm hopeless... I've been doing this for ages now, and I'll never be any different." And even worse, it is tempting to give-in to bitterness and give-up on God - "This faith stuff doesn't get me anywhere... it doesn't work."

It takes faith and courage to persevere... to try again... to keep going... to return to this tough business of repentance, of clearing away the weeds... yet again! But that's what Lent calls us to... as individuals and as a church.

So we begin again today... We accept the ashes of contrition and repentance on our foreheads... and we pray... together and each of us in the privacy of our hearts... 'Yes, Lord - it is necessary. My life is full of weeds and brambles that need to be cleared, in order that I may be fertile ground for your Spirit. And I am deeply sorry that I've let it come to this again! Help me!'

The wise Desert Father says: "...work just a little bit without getting discouraged, and God by God's grace will re-establish you."

That's our faith - that the Spirit will take our fumbling efforts and do something with them. That's our faith... and here we go again! No one pretends we have to like it... it may even be boring... but it's necessary. There is no other way.

In the name of God. Amen