

Wednesday 1 March: Ash Wednesday

Bread and stones

Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12,17; John 8:1-11

Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you."

Here at St Martin's, stones have been prominent in our thoughts for some time and for obvious reasons. Stones – some of which have been in place for centuries and which hold significant memories for us – are being broken up all around us by heavy machinery and men in hard hats. Others are planning the laying of new stones for rebuilding and creating new spaces. Not surprisingly, we have been prompted to reflect a good deal on the stones of our buildings and on ourselves as a community of living stones.

Sadly, the public image of religion is often no so much about the stones which build up, but the stones that are hurled in condemnation. Our Gospel reading reminded us of that and it's all too easy to see it in contemporary images of religion. In Nigeria, Christians and Moslems are engaged in spiralling levels of violence against people and property with innocence and blame being shared fairly equally on both sides. Iraq teeters on the brink of civil war between Shias and Sunnis – different expressions of the same faith. And in many countries, protests against the now infamous cartoons of the prophet Mohammed have resulted in stones – metaphorical and actual – being hurled in all directions against publishers and protesters alike. Of course, religious people don't have a monopoly on stone throwing, finger pointing or finding someone to blame, but neither do we show any great evidence of having taken to heart the words of Jesus: *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."*

Last summer, in the aftermath of the bombings of July 7, the temptation to hurl stones of condemnation at the perpetrators of the outrage and their communities was strong. But a reading at Morning Prayer on the day after the bombings prompted us to think about stones in a different way. The reading was the story of David and Goliath. As David set out to confront the Philistine giant, he's given the armour of King Saul to protect him. As he struggled with the cumbersome armour, the young boy says in desperation "I can't walk with all this on". Instead the boy David ditched his armour and carefully chose five smooth stones. That incident seemed a strangely appropriate response to the challenge that we faced then and now. Instead of clothing ourselves with a whole new set of armour, generating a stifling level of fear and suspicion that would leave us unable to walk and function as human beings, we began to ask how the giant of spiralling violence and conflict might be slain by a careful choice of five smooth stones. What might be the five smooth stones of building community?

Over the coming Sundays of Lent, we're going to explore five possible ideas for those smooth stones of community building, that's our Lent theme. As a sneak preview, here they are: Firstly, we are going to acknowledge where we are – perhaps in the wilderness facing the temptation of easy solutions to community conflict; perhaps confused, questioning, insecure or uncertain. Secondly, we are going to educate ourselves about that place; exploring the meaning of discipleship and learning for discovering purpose and meaning in community.

Thirdly, we are going to think about communicating who we are and what we believe community to be about with those around us. Fourthly we'll realise the need not just to think but to *do* – to live the values we believe are important for community. And finally, we are going to reflect on the celebration of the Eucharist as the very heart of our community life and as something which enables us to see and live differently.

That's where we are going in the coming weeks of Lent but before we begin to build we have to be realistic about the task that confronts us. Before we can be part of the building solution, we need an honest assessment of the part we play in that which breaks down - the destructiveness that threatens community life at all levels. We need to own the contributions we make collectively and individual to the spiralling violence in our world. That calls for realistic self-examination and repentance.

There's nothing new in that call. In the face of destruction, the prophet Joel called the people of Israel to repentance, people of all ages drawn together in a collective act of repentance. But repentance itself is a word with a misunderstood and unpopular public image. And it can evoke other images of stones – stones hurled at those deemed sinful or in need of reform, or indeed stones hurled at ourselves as a mechanism for self-loathing.

At its most powerful, this liturgy of Ash Wednesday is, for me, what can hold all those tensions together. Through its symbolism, it confronts us vividly with the need for repentance and equally vividly with the forgiveness and grace of God. It confronts us both with that which breaks down and that which builds up.

Here we are given ash as an unmistakable physical symbol of the consequences of our own destructive and self-destructive behaviour. The cross that is traced in ash on our foreheads mirrors that which happens in the water of life at our baptism and reminds us of how easily we fail and forget the promises we made then. But the words spoken with the ashing also remind us gently but clearly of the limits of our human nature – and by so doing of the unlimited grace of God. “Remember you are dust” and yet are called through grace into a faithful relationship with Christ.

And it's not just ash that we receive in this service. The God whom Joel describes as gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love will not abandon us merely to laments over our wretchedness or unworthiness or give us stones to hurl at ourselves or others. “Neither do I condemn you” says Jesus and here, before the smudged ashen cross has faded, grace refreshes us with living bread and flowing wine. Here the church gives ash the sign of repentance and God gives us bread and wine the banquet for those who have been reconciled.

We begin this Lent in repentance accepting our part in the destructiveness that threatens humanity itself and turns community life to dust and ashes. We begin this Lent praying for wisdom in selecting the smooth stones that will enable us to rebuild that community life. We begin this Lent in the ashes of penitence, but also in confidence that, as we are fed once again at this feast of life, so we are assured this God of grace and mercy will not give his children stones when we ask for bread.