

Ash Wednesday
25/2/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Joel 2:1 – 2, 12 – 17

Psalm 51

2 Corinthians 5:16 – 6:2

The root of asceticism: eagerness of soul

At the beginning of the Christian era each Sunday was celebrated as a little Easter, and the central feast of the Church was the wondrous 50 days between Easter and Pentecost.

Lent evolved as a time when catechumens were prepared for Baptism, and penitents were made ready for restoration to the fold: at Easter. Lent was a time of **training/discipline**: earnest preparation to receive afresh the joyful triumph of the Resurrection.

Over the centuries Lent became so overlaid with notions of penitence and fasting that it was easy to lose the original mood, which included sorrow for sin, but anticipated the joy of Christ's gift to us of a new beginning.

Protestants have never been into hard-core asceticism. They tended to spurn the prayer and fasting associated with Lent as having the potential for self-salvation. Ironically, they committed to working hard, being thrifty, eschewing drink, and generally put a lot of effort into their version of a holy life, which in turn brought its own problems.

How do we keep the right balance in following Christ? We may find some help in probing the meaning of the asceticism associated with Lent.

The Greek word "ascesis" is only used once in the New Testament (Acts 24:16) and yet the practice of asceticism has influenced the history of the Church very deeply, and was there from the beginning.

We tend to see asceticism as concerned with denial and therefore negative, but the original sense was not so. Asceticism was used to describe the striving or discipline a person might undertake to become an athlete and enter the games. It also included doing what it took to learn a craft or a profession. This was not life denying. It was intentionally entering into the discipline of learning so that a person may be stronger or quicker, more skilled or learned and wise.

In the one New Testament usage of "ascesis" Paul is before the Governor Felix defending his behaviour (Acts 24:16). The NRSV translates "askeo" as "***Therefore I do my best, always, to have a clear conscience toward God and all people***". An earlier translation is: "***I exert myself***".

"*I exert myself*" applies nicely to the choice to learn a musical instrument, or a language, or Tai Chi: it speaks of a repetitive, disciplined approach that leads to developing a new skill. It also speaks about embedding a habit in the heart so that mind and heart and action become integrated.

There is **effort** involved in this, which is what Protestants were afraid of, but in Christian tradition the effort was never for its own sake. It was born of an eagerness of soul that was not based on fear or negativity. Nor was not born of hatred of the body or a despising of the world. It was rooted in God's gift of merciful, transforming love that enabled an entirely new start in life. It was born of the accepting grace made known in Christ at Easter.

Recently I watched a DVD of the Movie "*Cold Mountain*", set in the period when the Civil War began in America. At one stage the people of Cold Mountain are in church, singing a Hymn. There is a disturbance outside, the congregation stops and the people go out to see what is happening. Some young men rush up and shout: "Whoopee, we've got our war..." and the young men embrace one another all round. Only among the women is there any hint of resistance to this celebration of a coming evil.

In 2001 the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote an article on Christians and War. He argued that the present approach to war in the world is a breach of the Christian ethical principles of a Just War, as defined by St Augustine, and is untenable in nations led by confessing Christians. His article was published in *Time Magazine* the day before September 11. As a result he earned himself a position well out on left field.

Hauerwas explained that when he went to churches to speak or teach about Just War principles he was appalled to discover Christians who had never heard that engaging in War could be wrong. No ethical teaching on this subject has been offered despite a rich tradition that has existed for over fifteen hundred years. Hauerwas' goal in drawing people's attention to these principles was not to provoke Christians to withdraw from civil society. Rather, his aim was to have Christians participate in civil society as people who understand the Gospel and the implications it has for living an ethical life in the world. He called for people of Christian faith to *exert themselves*: to live by their faith in the world in discerning way.

"*I exert myself*" relates to the commitment to a spiritual discipline that, under grace, provides a framework for staying focused on God's gift of the Kingdom and what that means for life.

We will have a truly holy Lent if we begin by seeing that asceticism is not rooted in negativity. It is rooted in eagerness of soul for the Gospel. Such eagerness of soul is not self-created. It is born of God's love for us: it is a response to grace, the news of our new creation at the hands of God in Christ.

Sister Thecla an early Christian virgin said: "I believe that without the impetus of love, it is not possible to begin or continue any journey of the Spirit." This is the source of our eagerness of soul.

This is the strength that enables us to joyfully undertake what is difficult. It enables us to strain reach beyond the limits, to engage new boundaries of faith and experience. We do this out of the joy of knowing we are loved by God, and the desire to live and grow in that love.
