

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Wednesday February 14 2024

Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday

12 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Ash Wednesday

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

With these lines, the poignant Psalm 51 suggests us the most suitable words and sentiments to enter the Lenten period, inaugurated today with the highly symbolic rite of the ashes. It is normal, on this day, to adopt a certain sobriety, a serious and resolute attitude, so as to welcome properly this time of grace, this opportunity for conversion and repentance, and try to return to the most essential things in our life, to what should matter most, to what we tend to neglect sometimes.

And yet I find some salutary irony in Jesus' words in today's gospel. Precisely when we are intent on our resolutions for Lent and on taking our Christian life a bit more seriously, Jesus invites us not to look too somber and gloomy and *not to disfigure our faces but rather anoint our head and wash our face* (Mt 6.18).

And Psalm 50 too at one point makes us say "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps 51.12).

Whenever I read these sentences I am reminded of Saint Benedict's words in his Rule. Despite being traditionally represented as an austere man, when he talks about Lent, he says that we should spend it "waiting for Easter in the joy of spiritual desire" (RB 49.7)

Joy again!

One of the questions to ask ourselves at the beginning of Lent, then, could be this: do I feel joy in God's salvation? Or, to put it in another way, do I perceive a link between joy and salvation?

The word "salvation" might sound a bit excessive. We associate it with imminent danger and rescue. I need to be saved if I am about to drown, if I am seriously ill and must be rushed to the hospital.

Instead, the book of Deuteronomy describes salvation as an experience of the Lord's care and kindness, of how much we matter to him:

Remember all the way that the Lord, your God, has made you travel in these forty years in the desert ... Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell during these forty years ... The Lord ... brought you water out of the flinty rock; he fed you with manna unknown to your fathers, to make you happy in your future "(Dt 8,1-17)

In other words, salvation is the discovery that we are not alone in our desert - and here by desert we can think not only to the times of trial as an illness, a bereavement, a betrayal, but also to the dryness that we often experience in our daily life, the sense of emptiness, our worries about the future.

When we pray that the Lord may "restore to us the joy of his salvation" we are asking him for eyes to see the way in which he remains close to us, takes care of us, supports us, comforts us and accompanies us in our deserts, exactly as he did with his people in the Sinai.

The favourite Old Testament word to describe salvation is not only nor primarily "rescue" but "covenant", that is, a relationship of friendship with God - the way in which he enters in our life, walks beside us, takes care of us.

There is no deeper source of joy in life than this: love, in all its forms, in our family, in friendship, in our communities, with our husband, our wife, our partner. Nothing alleviates anxieties and suffering like sharing, like the presence and care of those who love us, like knowing that we can count on someone.

If we think of salvation in this way, as a relationship, then we understand how it is something that can give us deep, real, heartfelt JOY.

At the beginning of this time of Lent then let resolve to focus on this joy – by infusing new imagination, desire, commitment, tenderness in our relationship with God and with each other.

Sometimes we can take these relationships for granted, especially with our partner and in our families.

We let ourselves to be distracted by the inevitable misunderstandings, tensions and sometimes conflicts that are normal in every human relationship, even - and perhaps above all - those that are dearest to us, and we forget all the comfort, meaning, encouragement we draw from them.

We lose sight of 'the joy of our salvation', that is, the joy of the relationships that give us life.

And we do the same with the Lord. We take for granted his presence, his care, and the meaning and strength that he gives to our lives – what would we be without him!

It is for this reason that the psalm speaks of rediscovering, restoring, renewing again this joy: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation".

If we want to take advantage of Lent to lose weight let us do it by all means: anything that restores our health – and makes us proud of our waist- gives pleasure not only to us but to God too!

But let us not forget that what makes our lives worth living is the quality of our relationships and our friendships.

To keep this resolution in mind and persevere in it, we can use the sentence of this psalm as a reminder and as a prayer, repeating it often during the coming forty days: "Restore to me, O Lord, the joy of your salvation".