

A Liturgy for Ash Wednesday

Opening Sentences

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

—Matthew 3:2

Psalm

Have mercy upon me, O God, in your great goodness;
according to the multitude of your mercies wipe away my offences.
Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I acknowledge my faults,
and my sin is ever before me....
Behold, you desire truth in the inward parts
and shall make me understand wisdom secretly.
You shall purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
you shall wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
You shall make me hear of joy and gladness,
that the bones which you have broken may rejoice.
Turn your face from my sins,
and blot out all my misdeeds.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

—Psalm 51:1-3, 6-10, New Coverdale

Poem

Matthew

First of the four, Saint Matthew is the Man;
A Gospel that begins with generation,
Family lines entwine around the Son
Born in Judea, born for every nation,
Born under Law that all the Law of Moses
Might be fulfilled and flower into Grace;
A hidden thread of words and deeds discloses
Eternal love within a human face.
This is the Gospel of the great reversal:
A wayside weed is Solomon in glory,
The smallest sparrow's fall is universal
And Christ is the heart of every human story:
"I will be with you, though you may not see,
And all you do, you do it unto me."

—Malcolm Guite

The Readings

If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

—Isaiah 58:10-11, NKJV

Jesus said, “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you....

“When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you....

“When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

—Matthew 6:3-4, 6, 17-21, ESV

Reflection

They’ve not come yet, I thought. All the prettiness the artists painted isn’t here. No angels, no shepherds, no children with their lambs. It’s stripped down to the bare bones of the rock and the child. There’s no one here. And then I thought, I am here, and I asked, who am I, Lord? And then I knew I was everyone. I wasn’t solitary. Everyone was me and I was everyone. We were all here, every sinner whose evil had built up those dark walls that held the child like a trap. For looking round I saw that the cave of the nativity was very small. The walls were pressing in upon him close and hard and dark like they pressed in on me.

And the old claustrophobic terror was back on me again, but not for myself. I remembered the rocks of the wilderness and the multitude of sinners surging in, selfish and clamorous, sick and sweaty, clawing with their hot hands, giving him no time so much as to eat. I remembered the mocking crowd about the cross and the thick darkness. I remembered the second cave, the dark and stifling tomb. Two stony caves, forming as it were the two clasps of the circle of his life on earth.

And I remembered St. Augustine saying, ‘He looked us through the lattice of our flesh and spake us fair.’ Shut up in that prison of aching flesh and torn nerves, trapped in it....The Lord of glory....I remembered the sword of light that had split the rock of sin, making for me the way of escape to where he was at the heart of it. At my heart. At the heart of everything that happened to me, everything I did, everything I endured. He was not the weakness that he seemed for he had a sword in his hand and all evil at last would go reeling back before it. He had entered the prison house of his own will. And so he was not trapped and nor was I. There was always the way of escape so long as it was to the heart of it, whatever it was, that one went to find him....

And then I began to think. I remembered how rebellious I had been, and how I had told the old man that I had done nothing that called for dust and ashes, and he had replied, ‘No?’ I hadn’t realized then just how vile my own sin is and that every sinner must bear the pressing in of my sin, as I bear his, in penitence. And I thought that the dust and ashes of the suffering that results from sin is purging if offered as prayer for each other.

—Elizabeth Goudge, *The Scent of Water*

Closing Prayer

We bless You, heavenly Father, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because You remember us. When you come into our hearts, we are filled with Your joy. You are our glory, the exultation of our hearts; You are our hope and refuge in the day of trouble. But because we are feeble in love and imperfect in virtue, therefore we need to be strengthened by You. Therefore visit us, Lord, oft times; and instruct us with holy discipline. Deliver us from our evil passions and heal our hearts from all wrongful affections: that we, inwardly healed and well purified, may be able to love, strong to suffer, steady to persevere.

—Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

Benediction

In this season of Lent, may you know the love of God as revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ, His arms stretched wide to embrace you and draw you to Himself. May you turn your face toward His, that you may be healed and made whole. May you keep your eyes on Him, that you might walk in His ways and be transformed into His likeness, for His glory and the good of His people. Amen.

Resources:

“Matthew” from [Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Church Year](#) by [Malcolm Guite](#)
[The Scent of Water](#) by Elizabeth Goudge

Prayer of Thomas à Kempis from [The Private Prayer Book of Evelyn Underhill](#), edited by Robin Wrigley-Carr