

Homily for the First Day in Lent: Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018
Sung Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Isaiah 58:1–12, Psalm 103:8–14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10, Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Very briefly. Our first lesson from the book of Isaiah comes from the period when the Jewish people have returned from exile in Babylon.¹ The temple and the walls of the city are being rebuilt. And the Hebrews relearning their story. The passage proclaims that the Lord does not desire fasting from his people, but kindness and justice—themes that are never hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the New Testament. God is never pleased simply by the observance of rituals and rules when people are hungry, when people have no shelter.

The prophet Isaiah uses words that will be repeated Jesus in his own way. The prophet tells us first, “to loose the bonds of wickedness . . . [and] to let the oppressed go free.”² Second, “to share [our] bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into

¹ Martin A. Sweeney, “Isaiah,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 916–62.

² Isaiah 58:6.

[our] house[s].”³ And third, “when [we] see the naked, to cover [them].”⁴

When we hear words like this, I think it is hard for any of us not to recall the words in Matthew’s gospel that we know as the great judgment—the passage in the New Testament that continually stands above all others in judgment upon us as individuals and on our rulers, our governments.

Jesus’ said, “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ”⁵ Jesus explained to them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.”⁶

³ Isaiah 58:7a.

⁴ Isaiah 58:7b.

⁵ Matthew 25:34–36.

⁶ Matthew 25:40. My translation; the Greek here is inclusive.

I would like, respectfully, to suggest that each of us might think about finding some new way this Lent not to give up something but to give to others in a way we haven't given before.

I know very well that hunger and poverty in families and in our society in general are rarely simple problems. I know that there are many good people working to help others. I'm going to try to worry less this Lent about not eating meat on Friday and to try to find some way quietly and anonymously to help people in need in a way in which I haven't done before.

I close with these words from the prophet Micah, who lived just before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its walls and temple, and the exile to Babylon: “[The LORD] has showed you, O human, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Micah 6:8.

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