

## **Ritual, Repentance and Renewal**

Ash Wednesday, Year C, RCL. Isaiah 58:1-12. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. February 10, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

It is clear from what Isaiah and Jesus have to say about disciplines of repentance that there is an important difference between ritual performance and the transformation of a person's, or a community's, relationship to God.

The rituals of repentance for our shortcomings are well established; we are performing one of them now, the Ash Wednesday service, with several very penitential components of great traditional heft and resonance—the imposition of ashes, the recitation of the Litany of Penitence, and so on.

And these are not unimportant, because symbols of repentance and reconciliation—and the stories and actions that go with them—are important guides and supports in what is really important: renewing our damaged relationships with God and other people and repairing the disorder in our personal thoughts and activities.

However, the notion that we can simply go through the motions, the more elaborately the better, and still get somewhere is the bane of religious practice. It makes religion into a show and it makes repentance and renewal shallow. There are two ways to fix this:

The first way is to change the ritual practice. By which I mean, vary the systematic discipline that is designed to open the heart, mind and will to God. A good example of that sort of thing is choosing a Lenten discipline we wouldn't normally consider or have available, such as the guided process of developing a rule of life that will be offered at Our Saviour on Sundays after church and at Trinity on Wednesday evenings, starting this coming Sunday and next Wednesday. A change of approach, particularly with group support, can be refreshing and renewing.

The other way to fix dullness and dead-ends in religious practice is changing the focus from what it does for me to what it does for God, other people, this fragile earth (our island home), and so on. The more specific this focus is, the better. And don't be put off by the notion that we cannot *really* do things for God; we cannot do anything God *needs*, but we can do plenty that he *wants*, delights in, is happy to respond to. He did not need to create us, but now that we're here, we (and all his troubled creation) have his full and loving attention.

The thing is, *we* have to pay attention, too. That's what's tricky, vulnerable as we are to distraction, evasion and bad advice. Our ritual practice and our spiritual focus should be other-centered and it should intend good effects beyond our own inner life. God's blessing is able to work abundantly when those two conditions are present. Will we personally get something out of it? Naturally; that's the way it works.

We find ourselves through giving ourselves away. We are renewed through generosity, ours and God's. That's what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about.

And that's what Lent is all about: a call to renew our ritual practice and get the rubber on the road in actions of generosity, mercy, compassion and reconciliation. Learning to talk better to God and each other, to be more honest and peaceable with ourselves, and do work that honors God better and more deeply eases the suffering of the world.