

Ash Wednesday

EXCLAMATORY FASTS

Isaiah 58:1-12

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?' Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

DIAGNOSIS: My Fast

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“Look, God, Look!”*

Woe to Jacob’s house (v. 1b)? Then woe all the more to the house of Jesus. See how they cluster today, not the riffraff but the remnant, the faithful core, the ones who won’t miss a service or let their kids skip either. This being Ash Wednesday they’re here for the grim word and the ashen mark, and when they take it their faces will be grave; though you’ll notice, looking closely, how the steps that bring them forward are firm and purposeful, suggesting a certain “delight” as they “draw near to God” even on this day (v. 2). Some will long since have settled on this year’s Lenten fast—candy and carbonated soft drinks will be the leading choices of the younger set. Others, averring that fasting is “too Catholic for me,” will aim to keep their Lutheran Lent (let’s say) with deeper prayer and longer devotion, and by trying for once to get the family to all the midweek services. And when the spouse protests that he’d rather

wear sackcloth and ashes than sit through all those sermons and dreary hymns, the patient answer will be, as ever, that such things are “acceptable to the LORD” (v. 5), a means of honoring him.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“He Can’t Be Serious!”*

Comes the preacher’s dilemma. Will he dare to “trumpet” the LORD’s dismay over the “rebellion” of the pious, over “sins” (v. 1) that he exacerbated the moment he posted this year’s Lenten schedule and urged folks to show up? They sit there, of course they do, expecting God to “notice” (v. 3) who is present and who is not, and on that account to judge them “righteous” (v. 2), or at least better—more earnest, more seriously Christian—than the absent. They’ll also sit there, lots of them, letting the prophet’s word wash over them with little heed for its bite; or if they do feel nipped, they’ll protest as sinners must and always do. Take in a homeless person (v. 7)? “Unreasonable!” Undo injustice, free the oppressed (v. 6)? “Not my job! Above my pay grade!” Again, will the preacher risk next week’s attendance (and next year’s paycheck?) by pointing out the double standard in play here? How the pious expect God to take them seriously even as they refuse to take God seriously? Could it be that the preacher’s own heart is bent on believing that God demands too much by far? (“Look, they’re good people. They’re here, aren’t they? So I’ll whisper; I’ll intimate. Let God be content with that!”)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“I Don’t Think So!”*

The LORD content? Fat chance! He means this day to pour it on, to crush the conceit by which we “humble ourselves” to win his applause (v. 3a). So he mocks the self-interest of our presence at the day’s observance (v. 3b). He laughs at the yawning gap between our liturgical piety and our daily behavior (v. 4a). He takes a backhand swipe at our collusion in a system that

enriches some and shackles others (v. 6). He demands of us a useful and costly fast that serves to transfer what is ours to others who need it more (v. 7) and he makes it plain that anything less is beneath his notice (v. 4b). And when we cavil and protest—not if, but when—his response will be a righteous judgment we cannot bear. “As if they...practiced righteousness,” says the LORD, emphasis on the “as if” (v. 2). By implication, “Who do you think you’re kidding? Where you’re concerned my ear is deaf, my back turned. I do not know you.”

PROGNOSIS: The Lord’s Fast

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : “He Did It!”

Yet suppose that sitting with us today is One who did keep the LORD’s fast and does so still; who gave and gives his all, body and Spirit, to loose bonds, free the oppressed, and break yokes (v. 6), including above all the deadly collar of God’s impossible expectations of us; who delights in giving himself as bread to the hungry and preparing rooms in the Father’s house for the homeless poor (v. 7; cf. John 14:2); who is quick to cover the naked with his identity and will do so also for the feckless kinfolk who surround him in this worshipping moment (v. 7). Is there such a One, both with us and for us today? Well of course. His name is Christ Jesus, his mark the brand on the forehead that today’s ashes will highlight. Behold the brand! It calls to mind the singular righteousness of the ultimate fast, his death for our sakes on a day finally “acceptable to the LORD” (v. 5); in response to which the God answered his “cry for help” (v. 9) and raised him from the dead, his “light [rising] in the darkness” and turning our gloom into “noonday” (v. 10), he himself being the “restorer of streets,” the “repairer of the breach,” the rebuilder of ruins, and the cornerstone of a foundation on which “many generations” now stand (v. 12; cf. Eph. 2:20).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“What a Fool I Was!”*

So let the preacher trumpet the saving fast of Christ. When she does the LORD's Spirit will break another yoke (v. 6), the ring of old flesh that hangs around her hearers' necks (Luther) fussing and spitting at God. Gone will be “the pointing of the finger” and the “speaking of evil” (v. 9b) over God's refusal to applaud their piety. Instead you'll see them applauding Christ's piety, his steadfast adherence on their behalf to the LORD's agenda of setting them free. Could be that in the midst of their applause they'll catch themselves blushing at their former silliness in thinking that their attendance at an Ash Wednesday service amounted to anything in itself—anything other, that is, than a superb chance to exult in the mercy of God, unreasonable to the nth degree and excellent beyond understanding. Notice how easy it suddenly becomes for them not only to take God seriously but also to beat God to the punch (almost) in laughing at themselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Look, Neighbor, Look!”*

And notice this too, how with hearts reset on the right fast—Christ's, not theirs—these same people will leave the liturgy with steps even firmer than those that brought them there. The LORD, after all, will have made their “bones strong” and satisfied their need in the “parched places” of his prior disapproval (v. 11). So off they will head—guess what?—to keep a fast. Not theirs, but Christ's. Not to win God's notice but to help neighbors notice their God; and their faces, still grave, will belie a new delight in drawing near to those neighbors to pass along the righteous judgment that Christ has won for them as well. “You're all right—you too,” they'll say. By word or deed they'll say it, at an expense to themselves that will sometimes be great. So it is that Christians of every time and

every place have kept the fast of the LORD's choosing, a lifelong Lent acceptable to him. How does Christ himself put it? "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," (Mark 8:34), and yes, for the sake of the poor, the hungry, the naked, the oppressed (vv. 6-7; cf. Matt. 25:35-36, 40). And so they do. So they will.