

(With thanks to Fr. David Romanik of Heavenly Rest, Abilene, for sermon seeds)

There are several customs that mark our observance of Ash Wednesday every year. They follow after the sermon. First, we have the Imposition of Ashes, which are an ancient biblical sign of our mortality and penitence.

Then we pray that ancient penitential psalm, Psalm 51 together. It is a psalm attributed to King David and carries the inscription that it was written, "*When the prophet Nathan came to David after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.*"¹

Then, we have the longest prayer of confession that we ever pray during the church year. It is titled the Litany of Penitence.²

In church terms, a litany is a series of responsive prayers prayed alternately by a leader and the whole congregation.

But the word has come into secular usage as well. In secular terms, a litany is a long list or a long repetitive series or set of complaints or problems.

The Litany of Penitence is a litany in both the church and secular senses of the word. It is a long recitation of all of our failings and shortcomings, often in fairly excruciating detail.

"We confess... that we have sinned by our own fault in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

And we continue to confess to God,

"We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven."

And it is a long litany, and it continues with statements like

"We have been deaf to your call to serve."

We confess to "unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives...

"Our self-indulgent appetites and ways...

"Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts...

"Our negligence in prayer and worship...

"Our blindness to human need and suffering...

"Our indifference to injustice and cruelty."

It's a tough list. It's a long litany of the ways we often fall short of God's call and God's plan. Though we are created in God's image, we fail to display and manifest the ways of God to the world time and time again.

¹ Psalm 51:0

² BCP p 267ff

Yes, at some times we actually do a decent job at being God's people the world. But at many other times in our lives, we have the capacity to be a pretty rotten bunch. In Biblical language, we sin, we miss the mark, we don't hit the target we're aiming for.

If I were God, I'm not sure I'd want to have anything to do with people who acted like that.

But thank God that I'm not God. Thank God that he is so much better and more compassionate and more loving and merciful than any of us would probably choose to be if we were in his shoes.

And that brings me to one of the coolest things I get to do during the year.

During the Litany, I'm kneeling with you. Not because you need me to be an intermediary between you and God. Priest and people, we are all equal before God. But as a priest, a presbyter, and elder in the church, I kneel with you before God's altar leading you in our joint prayer, our joint litany of penitence.

But then I get to do something amazingly cool. I get to stand and turn around and face you. Not because of how special or how wonderful I am. Rather it's because you have called me to lead you in worship. And part of that leadership is to remind you of the truth of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

I face you not because of how special or how wonderful I am. Rather, I face you to remind you of how special and wonderful God is.

On behalf of God, on behalf of the Body of Christ, the church, I get to remind you of what God is like.

God is loving and forgiving. And I get to remind you of that. I get to say that "(God) has given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins."

I don't forgive you your sins. I remind you of the Good News that when you are penitent and confess your sins, God forgives your sins, God absolves of them. God wipes the slate clean.

If we confess our sins, God forgives us our sins and cleanses us from everything we've done wrong.³

God takes your sins and hurls them into the uttermost depths of the sea where they will be remembered no more.⁴

As far as east is from west—that's how far God removes

³ 1John 1:9

⁴ Micah 7:19

our sin from us.⁵

And then I get to say to you, "(God) pardons and absolves all those who truly repent, and with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel."

And as I do so I make a gesture. It's not a gesture of my power. I'm not holding up my hands and shooting out bolts of lightning-like forgiveness from the power of Jim Haney.

No. I'm making a gesture of my weakness and God's strength. I make before you the sign of the cross.

And as I make that liturgical gesture, some of you will also physically embrace the cross by repeating the sign right in front of you, grasping the cross symbolically, holding it close. But whether you make the sign physically or just embrace the cross spiritually, it is a reminder that the cross is the essence of what brings us forgiveness.

When we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God's way of dealing with our sins. His cross brings us cleansing. His death brings us forgiveness. And it's not just us, it's not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world.⁶

Amazing.

And then after that declaration we rise together as forgiven sinners. We exchange a greeting reminding each other of the peace God brings.

And then we participate in the sacred meal which reminds us of what Jesus has done. Jesus died and rose again. And we proclaim that death and resurrection, and we share in the power of his death and resurrection whenever we break the bread and share the cup.

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.⁷

How happy, how blessed are those who are called to the Supper of the Lamb.⁸

⁵ Psalm 103:12

⁶ 1John 2:1-2

⁷ John 1:29

⁸ Revelation 19:9