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Ash Wednesday – St George’s Cathedral
22 February 2012

May I speak in the name of God, who desires to forgive sin, and bring newness of life.

‘Turn away from sin, and believe the good news’ – these are the words with which each of us are anointed with ash today. Sin and good news, hand in hand.

Sin is a very unfashionable word, yet we cannot have God’s good news if we do not acknowledge our involvement in sin.

If we are better to appreciate, and receive, the fullness of God’s good news, we and our world need a better grasp and fuller acknowledgement of sin, in every area of life.

This means not just in the personal, domestic, sphere – but also in public arena.

Alongside politics at every level: national to local, elected to official; this also means in business and professional life, in academia, in the media, and across civil society.

The aim is not to put ourselves or others under condemnation, but rather, to open up ourselves, our church, society and world – to open us up to the glorious opportunities for God’s salvation and redemption in every area of human life and activity.

We certainly need God’s rescue and recovery in so much of society!

Yet if we do not acknowledge sin, how can we receive God’s more than wonderful solution to sin?

But admitting guilt, and feeling shame, appear increasingly alien in today’s society.

Sometimes it seems the only sin is being caught. Short of a criminal conviction, we are asked to believe, and act as if, everyone is more innocent than the proverbial dove.

And no matter how dubious a person’s reputation, or how dodgy their track record, if that person’s suitability for some task or role is questioned, then it seems that the questioner is the one branded as being in the wrong.

Further, when apologies are issued, too often they are given, in terms not of an admission of wrong doing, but rather of regret that someone was offended.

It is as if the offended person is being blamed for being too soft-skinned!

Why have we got ourselves into this position?

It seems to me that the main cause is as much about failing to understand salvation, as it is about failing to understand sin.

For if there is no hope of salvation – no hope of forgiveness or redemption, no hope of God wiping the slate clean of guilt and shame, and providing an opportunity to make a fresh start – then no wonder we don't want to admit to being in the wrong.

We see it in little children: 'Did you eat the chocolate cake?' we say. 'No Daddy' replies the small child, even when caught with a face smeared with icing!

As adults, we are little better – though we may be far more skilled at constructing (or having our spokespeople construct for us) sophisticated excuses about how we really weren't at all responsible, and should not be considered as having failed in any way, or as bearing any sort of guilt in the matter!

But if no one is guilty of anything; if no one has failed, or fallen short, or let anyone down – then how can we go forward? How can we speak of righting wrongs, of addressing shortcomings, of doing better?

It is a recipe for accepting mediocrity and failure – and this is a disaster for our country.

But, thanks be to God, we have a remedy!

For God too does not want us to be left standing under condemnation.

And so, now we live in a world where Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has taken away the sins of the world (cf Jn 1:29); where he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Pet 2:24).

We live in a world where forgiveness is freely offered for true repentance and readiness to make amends.

Even more than this, the God of infinite love promises to redeem all that has gone awry; to rescue what is lost; to heal every hurt; to mend the broken; to cleanse what is marred; to overturn evil and bring good out of every situation and circumstance.

So then, what is the particular lesson for us this Ash Wednesday, this Lent?

It is this – that we must be gospel people, good news people, in declaring that God forgives sins, through the way we live our lives.

We must demonstrate that we are not afraid of sin – not afraid to admit we are 'only human': that we are less than perfect, that we often fail, that we get things wrong, that we make mistakes, and even that we sometimes intentionally choose wrong over right.

And in declaring we are not afraid of sin, we also declare – even more loudly and clearly – that the God of love desires to deal with sin: not through condemnation, but through salvation and redemption; through rescuing and restoring; through his infinite love and compassion for his needy children and his needy world.

So God's word to us this Lent, and our word to his world, is this: 'turn away from sin, and believe the good news'.

.May it be so. Amen