

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2014

Text: Matthew 6:1–6; 16–21

The Crucified King<sup>1</sup>

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus warns us three times in tonight's gospel reading against hypocrisy. A hypocrite in the ancient world wasn't a bad person. He was simply an actor not much different than today's Hollywood or Broadway actors. They played a role, sometimes funny, sometimes tragic; it was their vocation. But when it comes to our spirituality, our daily life of faith and obedience to God the Holy Trinity, play acting is simply out-of-place. Hypocrisy, acting out a part that is entirely fictitious, is a sin when it comes to living out our Christianity.

Three times Jesus exposes the Pharisees and their hypocrisy, their play-acting. But we mustn't point our fingers and roll our eyes at the hypocritical Pharisees too much. Instead, we must see ourselves in tonight's gospel. And take heed and repent lest we follow the way of the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Who of us hasn't pretended, acted out, something that wasn't true about our Christianity.

The Pharisees sounded the trumpet when they gave to the needy. Have you ever let it slip out when you gave a particular offering or helped some stranger? The Pharisees stood on the street corners to pray long, pious sounding prayers so that people would hear them and be impressed. Have you ever told someone you were praying for them when you hadn't been? It may have been an honest oversight. You just forgot, life got hectic and it slipped your mind. But you said you prayed for them anyway, play acting the part. The Pharisees put on a sour face so that everyone would know they were hungry and suffering due to their fasting. Maybe the bigger question for us Americans is do we fast at all? We'll go without food before having our blood drawn or before having surgery. But do we heed our Lord's expectation that we'll fast for the sole purpose of drawing closer to Him?

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the sermon Series "The Crucified King" published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 2014.

Tonight – Ash Wednesday – reminds us that we need repentance. That mark of ash on your forehead is a powerful reminder of our mortality. Those words you heard tonight, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” were first spoken by God to Adam after his original sin (Genesis 3:19). The greatest act of hypocrisy is to live as if sin didn’t matter at all; as if it’s no big deal. I haven’t hurt anyone; no one is suffering because of me or my actions. You know how easy it is to justify yourself.

But King Jesus calls us to set aside hypocrisy of every sort and look to Him for forgiveness and hope. Jesus remembers that you are dust, and to dust you shall return, but above all He remembers His mercy and His promise to rescue sinners. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords who left heaven to take on your flesh and blood and come down and rescue you.

It’s that King named Jesus who is seated on a mountain teaching in today’s Gospel. This King doesn’t sit on a throne robed in regal majesty surrounded by a royal court. Not this divine King. He is rather surrounded by sinners, men and women who at one time or another had played the hypocrite. This King teaches about life in His kingdom, about life in His Church. In tonight’s reading, King Jesus specifically mentions three aspects of our life of faith and obedience: giving to the poor and needy, prayer, and fasting. Regarding these disciplines, Jesus says “When you give ..., when you pray..., when you fast...” He takes it as a given that you will do these things. It’s not if but when.

But King Jesus is no play-actor, no hypocrite. He lived what He preached right up to and including His death on Calvary’s bitter tree. On the way there, He blew no trumpets, did not disfigure His face, or make big spectacles of His acts of love and charity. Even though He was God in the flesh, He didn’t stand on the street corners and impress people with His prayers; He was content to leave the crowds from time to time in order to pray alone to His Father in heaven. This was a King who was willing to be driven out to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights with no one knowing but the Father, and the devil who tempted Him. But He triumphed in His fasting, prayer, and giving.

This King is different from all other kings. He sought no thrones of glory or crowns of gold. He was content with a crown of thorns and a rough, wooden throne upon which He hung while paying for your sins and the sins of the world. He came to die a sinner’s death in order to save all sinners. To His throne He carried all our acts and thoughts of hypocrisy. Through His resurrection, He obtained for you and His people

of eternal kingdom. In His ascension, He secured for you a seat at the Father's right hand.

He's just the king we need: a crucified King. This King with a perfect, undivided heart, with precious blood, with fervent love and desire to save His people, this King has cleansed you of all sins and given you His Holy Spirit. His glory is not found in gold or silver but in a redeemed people. His glory is found in you.

Tonight, we heard that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But from that same dust you shall arise in resurrection splendor. This is true and certain because of the love of a crucified King.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.