

Ash Wednesday
3/5/14

St. Paul says, “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (II Cor. 5.20-6.2) Do you hear the urgency in his words? Earlier on, he said, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Paul pleaded with his listeners. His pleading, made so long ago, should still rattle us now. Paul’s words echo those of the prophet Isaiah which will also be heard in these Lenten days, “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” (Is. 55.6) As we begin this Lenten time, dare to bring God close, to draw him near.

As Christians we are taught to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Some have sought to calculate a date and then make the necessary preparations. Paul’s words do not settle for an ETA. He insists it is now. All those decisions we figure making on the then or the when of his coming are the ones we should be making now. The disregard or indifference for any reckoning has, with time, given us growing divides between rich and poor, between war and peace, between the online and the offline of the digital divide, between those who have life and those whose life depends on choices made by others. The borders in hearts as well as those on land seemed more hardened. The walls grow higher. The reasons why “now” is not convenient seem to mount.

The “now” in Paul’s urgent plea should echo in each of our hearts: “Now is a very acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.”

The holy, sacred time of Lent pushes us past the limitations of vision and will. The words of Paul pull the awaited kingdom close. They bring us to this sacred opportunity to change our minds, our hearts, and our wills we can see the foolishness and sinfulness of what divides us when the nearness of God is upon us.

Perhaps, it is not we who wait for God to come. Rather, God waits for us to come to him. So Jesus says to us now, “Come to me. Come near to me because I am already near to you.”

The “now” of Paul’s urgency can be found in the silence of prayer, in the kind word to a stranger, in the extended hands of friendship between adversaries, in the smile of one for whom we give shelter, in the first cry of the child coming into the world, in making our life more simple so others may simply live and in the welcome words of forgiveness.

Lent is a time for personal conversion. That does not mean it matters little to others. It is precisely the personal conversion that matters most. All our hopes for this weary, worried world can find the acceptable time and the day of salvation when the coming of God’s kingdom personally matters to me now.