

Ash Wednesday's Call to Repentance

(A reflection offered at the Ash Wednesday Pax Christi prayer service and demonstration at the "Ministry of Defense," London, England, on February 25th, 1998.)

"Now, now -- it is the Lord who speaks -- come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning." Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to the Lord your God again, for God is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent. Who knows if God will not turn again, will not relent, will not leave a blessing? Sound the trumpet! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children... Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, lament. Let them say, "Spare your people, Lord! Do not make your heritage a thing of shame, a byword for the nations. Why should it be said among the nations, 'Where is their God?' Then the Lord, jealous on behalf of his land, took pity on the people.

-- the Book of the prophet Joel, 2:12-18

This Ash Wednesday, the principalities and powers hover in the Persian Gulf threatening to slaughter and massacre the people of Iraq, in our names, in the name of God--again.

They continue to starve and kill the children of Baghdad through unjust sanctions; to permit 60,000 children to die everyday around the world from starvation; to encourage and legalize division, hatred, injustice, poverty, discrimination, racism, sexism, classism, and war--war in North Ireland, war in East Timor, war in Rwanda, war in Bosnia, war around the world.

Most of all, my country and yours continue to build, research and maintain 20,000 nuclear weapons, holding the world hostage, threatening to reduce us all to ashes.

And our church continues to justify war, bless institutionalized violence, practice injustice and remain silent and complicit in the face of these horrors.

And we ourselves harbor violence, resentment and hatred deep within us. Though we would wish otherwise, we know that the roots of war and nuclear weapons lie inside every one of us.

Today, we confess our complicity in the sin of violence.

Today, the Word of God comes to us from the prophet Joel: “Repent of your sins! Rend your hearts! Put on ashes! Fast for peace! Mourn for the victims of your violence! Turn back to the God of peace!”

We begin a season of repentance and conversion, a season of prayer and nonviolence, a season of resistance and public truth-telling.

This Ash Wednesday, we hear the Word of God, put on ashes, and pray that the God of peace will disarm our hearts and make us instruments to disarm the nations.

We pledge to repent of these sins against the God of peace and to believe in the Gospel of Jesus.

We repent of the sin of violence.

We repent of the sin of war.

We repent of the sin of mass murder, of killing our sisters and brothers around the world.

We repent of the sin of injustice.

We repent of the sin of threatening and preparing to bomb our sisters and brothers in Iraq.

We repent of the sin of supporting unjust sanctions which have killed over one million Iraqi children since the 1991 slaughter.

We repent of the sin of killing of sisters and brothers in East Timor.

We repent of the sin of division, violence and domination in North Ireland.

We repent of the sin of global domination, imperialism and oppression of the poor.

We repent of the sin of allowing, indeed forcing, millions of children to suffer in misery and starve to death around the world.

We repent of the sin of greed, consumerism, materialism, classism, militarism, discrimination, racism, sexism, torture, executions, and abortions.

We repent of the sin of destroying the oceans, the skies, and creation.

We repent of the sin of silence and apathy in the face of these horrors.

We repent of the sin of building, using, maintaining and threatening to use nuclear weapons.

We repent of the sin of rejecting the God of peace and life and worshiping the idols of war and death.

This Ash Wednesday, we turn back to you, God of peace, with broken hearts, with prayer, fasting, weeping, and mourning, in a spirit of repentance and conversion. We declare again:

We believe in the Gospel of peace.

We believe in Jesus, our brother and savior, our hope and our peace.

We believe in his way of loving our enemies, not bombing them; of forgiving one another, not seeking vengeance; of humbling serving one another, especially the poor, not dominating them; of showing compassion to all; of resisting state-sanctioned murder through active nonviolence.

We believe in Jesus' way of shedding our own blood rather than the blood of others; of undergoing suffering ourselves rather than inflicting suffering on others, as we struggle for justice; of taking up the cross ourselves, rather than nailing others to the cross.

We believe with Jesus that God outlaws war; that all nuclear weapons must be dismantled now; that all life is sacred; that every human being is our sister and brother; that the "Ministry of Defense" and the Pentagon and every military institution in the world should be closed; and that we

spend our resources feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, welcoming the refugee, healing the sick, liberating the imprisoned, educating our children, offering employment to all, and protecting the earth and all creation.

We believe in the Holy Spirit of mercy and reconciliation.

We believe in God of peace, the God of nonviolence, the God of life.

This Ash Wednesday, we repent of the sin of war and violence and return to the God of peace and nonviolence.

With the prophet Joel, we beg you God: Spare your people, the whole human family. Disarm us all and teach us the way of peace. Help us to resist war until every nuclear sword is beaten into a plowshare of peace, that one day soon, we may all praise you in peace, and welcome your reign of nonviolence and justice on earth. Amen.

* * * * *