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Good news in Lent

The Book of Common Prayer since its inception has taken sin seriously. The framers of our prayer book know that if we approach God "worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness" (BCP, 264) that God in his mercy will remit and forgive us of our sins. This is good news for the church as the Lenten season is approaching. I've always thought it interesting that lent comes at a time when the earth itself is undergoing transformation; the old leaves of winter have blown into the woods, bugs begin to make themselves known again, and life outside of our wintry windows is stirring as the buds on trees begin to sprout with new life. We too have the opportunity to sprout with new life. In fact, our Lord insists!

Many of us in the Episcopal Church have different theological convictions surrounding the awful effects of the fall in Genesis three. Whether you believe it to be metaphorical, literal, or figurative, there is something real about our human condition which needs to be dealt with. This is the obvious truth. Something terrible went wrong in grand proportion in Genesis three, yet, Christ "didst stretch out thine arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of thy saving embrace.."(BCP, 58). God's pursuit of humanity is immediately on display as he promises the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. It's God's will that comes to humanity through the second person of the Trinity.

Jesus' words "thy will be done" are striking words. They cut to the real issue of God's love for his people. St. Matthew has placed Jesus' teaching in a strategic location to demonstrate and to reflect the ministry of grace which characterizes our Lord's ministry. Prior to Jesus' teaching about how to pray in Matthew 6 Jesus shows us what Kingdom Life looks like. We have the Sermon on the Mount, teaching about murder, adultery, divorce, reconciliation, revenge, and love. In Matthew 6 we're confronted with how to pray. And our prayer is to be simple, not wordy. Jesus teaches us to pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He is teaching us that his grace far outweighs the grievous nature and burden of our sins (BCP, 331).

You cannot read the gospels without coming away with a strong sense that everywhere Jesus ministered he forgave sins. He pursues humanity even though our grievous errors continue to cast darkness in all aspects of our lives. But more stunningly, as Jesus prepared to ascend into heaven, he breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20: 22-23). Jesus' ministry continues to unfold. It unfolds especially through the life and ministry of the church. He has "given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins" (1928 BCP, 7). Not only does he grant forgiveness of sins, he refreshes us and transforms our lives. To the paralytic Jesus said, "Take courage, My son, your sins are forgiven…Rise, take up your bed, and go home" (Mathew 9: 2, 6).

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." During this Lenten season, it would do us well as the church to ponder, read, say aloud, and meditate upon the richness of God's mercy. After all, this is his prayer for us. **Amen.**