

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

Wednesday this past week was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, a time of reflection and preparation for Easter.

There is no mention of Lent in the Bible, so when and where did it start, and why do we do it?

Towards the end of the first century, as the Apostles grew older and died, one of the important questions facing the Church was, *how do we keep alive, for generations to come, the memory of the enormous significance of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection.* The Eastern Orthodox Church started by setting aside time for meditation before Easter, the most important celebration of the Christian life. The Council of Nicea (325 AD) endorsed a 40-day observance of Lent. In many languages, the word for Lent is the same as **forty**, most likely referring to the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness before starting His public ministry, suggesting His followers also spend time in meditation, reflection and prayer, preparing for their own ministry in this world.

The practice of marking a cross on the forehead with ash, is a symbol of a person's belonging. When Cain killed Abel, God in His mercy and love, "*put a mark on Cain*"<sup>1</sup> **for his own protection**, which scholars believe was a visible *mark* on Cain's forehead. The most visible part of the body is the face, and the most visible part of the face is the forehead, which lends credence to the fact that the mark of protection God placed on Cain was on his forehead. The branding of slaves was a mark of condemnation, but for Cain it was a mark of protection.

Several thousand years later, as the Hebrew people settled in their new homes after the exodus from Egypt, the Torah commanded all men to wear a small black leather box containing Scripture from the Torah, one

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 4:15

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

strapped to upper arm, hand and fingers (symbolic of doing things controlled by the word of God) and the other strapped to the forehead (symbolic of the mind being controlled by the Word of God), both as a mark of belonging to God who brought them out of bondage in Egypt.

Looking forward in time, John writing "God's Revelation to Jesus" about the future, mentions the mark of the beast<sup>2</sup>, which the Hebrew mindset of the time reading this, would have deciphered it as a mark of ownership which would replace the little black box on the arm and the forehead, which was a mark of belonging! Absolute sacrilege!

Marking the sign of a cross with ash on a person's forehead, symbolises the person as belonging to Jesus Christ, who died on a Cross.

Our meditation and reflection during Lent is centred on Jesus' statement, *If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me*<sup>3</sup>. He isn't asking us to do this literally. He means, *If you are truly my follower, can people see the mark of my cross on you? Can people see you **carrying** my cross (not as a burden on your back, but as badge of belonging), daily.*

This is James' message to the community of expat Jews who follow Christ.

Having told them the importance of controlling their speech, esp. when uncontrolled anger overcomes them as they face "trials of all kinds", difficult and aggravating situations, James says, *Check your hearts and minds are controlled by the the wisdom of God, **NOT** the wisdom of the world.*

This conflict in our hearts and minds spills out in our relationship with each other, and as a result, conditions our relationship with God.

---

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 13:1-2

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:23

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

The source of all conflict says James, is rooted in the "*cravings that are at war within you*". All conflict, be it political, religious, communal, social, or familial (family), are rooted in the following, "*You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them*" (v.2). Think of any conflict, global, regional, communal or within the family, all are rooted in these two factors.

All conflict is relational, how we relate with each other, seems impossible to resolve because of the "*cravings that are at war within you*" (v.1).

Every generation of the human race is the history of people who spend their lives attempting to unravel and settle conflict, but to no avail. At the heart of **all** relational conflict is a failure to please God, to do and to be, as God has made us.

The past week highlighted the human role in both, creating conflict and the difficulty in resolving conflict. A senior cabinet minister used an antiquated word, which at the time, was loaded with meaning. On a noon time radio show on Friday, an "activist" said, *If you step on my foot and its starts bleeding, it doesn't matter if you did it intentionally, or by accident; the fact is you stepped on my foot and it is bleeding.*

The presenter replied, *Yes it does matter. If I stepped on your foot deliberately, it would be far worse than stepping on it accidentally,* to which the activists said, *To excuse someone because of their intention, is irresponsible!*

An older lady on the panel commented, *If you are a human being and you can't make mistakes, where are we going to end up?*

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

It was both interesting and irritating to listen to one person who couldn't care less about the circumstances under which a word was spoken, and the other who spoke up for human frailty, which points to the need for forgiveness!

The values we create, are in conflict with the values of God, which are based on His Holiness.

James calls this **adultery** because God wants an exclusive, intentional relationship with us. James sums it up as follows: **God is passionate that the Spirit He has placed within you, should be faithful to Him, and Him alone** (v.5b).

Can we resolve this conflict which is at war within us? James outlines a few attitudes of the heart which help resolve conflict and put us in the favourable position of pleasing God, who is always available to help, because He is, as we sing, **The Lover of our Soul**.<sup>4</sup>

It all begins with grace, God's unmerited favour!

God does not offer His grace to those who want to manage their own lives, or manage God by doing things to earn His favour. Grace is God's gift to those who know they are limited in life's resources, who *strain* to pull out all the stops to access God's wisdom. **How?** God's grace bridges the gap between your finger tip stretching out for God's guiding wisdom, and God's hand stretching out to grasp yours!

Jesus' death and resurrection closes the gap and connects us to God, which releases God's Wisdom, His Love, His forgiveness, His mercy, **everything God is**, to flow into our lives. Jesus is God's grace offered to us.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus, lover of my soul, Let me to thy bosom fly...* Author: Charles Wesley (1740)

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

In closing, James offers us three attitudes of the heart which helps avail of God's grace:

1. A humble heart (7-10) which opens the door to God reaching out to you
2. A humble mind (11-12) which values God's Law; to judge and criticise others is to judge and criticise God's law. *God who gave the Law, is the Judge; He alone has the the power to save. what right do you have to judge your neighbour? (v.12)*
3. A humble life (13-16), submitted to God's plan for you, for He who created you, knows what is best for you.

Humility is the path to resolving conflict. Humility will rightly value God above self. Humility will also cause us to pursue godliness in the midst of conflict. It help us confess our sin before men and before God, and will also assist us as we strive to continue pleasing God in the midst of inevitable human conflict.

The bluntness of James' diagnosis can be hard to swallow, but it is also filled with grace. May we acknowledge our role in conflict and pursue pleasing God in the midst of conflict whether we are at fault or not.

*Remember, it is sin (not **a** sin) to know what you ought to do, and then not do it, a poignant reminder of the source of conflict when the first man and first woman **knew** what they **ought** to do, and then did not do it, and when caught, blamed each other.*

God's grace is freely available to each if us through Jesus our Christ. Will you take it? How will you be a blessing to others, unless God's grace fills you to overflowing with His blessings? **AMEN**

*Please click your browser's back button to return to the Church website (or click [HERE](#)).*

**PRAYER:** Father of all, Creator of all and Master over all. Forgive us when we think we know all the answers to life's problems; forgive us when we think we can solve all life's problems.

May we learn to have a humble heart, a humble mind and live a humble life, and as we do, let Your grace found only in Jesus our Christ, bridge our inability to access You.

Thank You for Your gift of the Holy Spirit who guides and directs us into all Truth, that we may be protected by the Truth of Your Word. **AMEN**