



Fr. Ambrose Bennett
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Abbey Church

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

In our first reading from Isaiah (Is 58.9-14), the prophet first calls the Israelites to repentance for their sins of injustice, oppression, and slander—that is, for all that is contrary to the Second Table of the Law, which concerns duties toward one's neighbor. Isaiah then calls upon Israel to repentance for sins against the love of God—those duties that are commanded in the First Table of the Law. Isaiah speaks especially of the sanctification of the Sabbath and of the necessity of putting the love of God before all else.

Isaiah assures his hearers that if they repent of their transgressions and return to faithfulness to God's Law, then the Lord will make the light rise for them in the darkness and that even the gloom will become as midday. Redeemed Israel will then become a restored Paradise, a watered garden and an unending spring of water. The breach between God and man will be mended and the ruins of Israel restored.

But then we must ask: how is this perfect repentance, this complete return to fidelity to God, to be accomplished? Is not the attainment of such righteousness beyond our ability? We seem to be caught in an impossible dilemma: the bar has been raised so high that our very imperfect repentance will not suffice to fulfill the duties of either table of the Law. Even when we have done what we can, we are still liable to self-righteousness of one sort or another. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it:

The final enigma of history is therefore not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome (from *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, v. 2).

That was and is the perennial dilemma of the Pharisees and of all who love God's Law. Of course, the sinners and tax collectors have no answers for us, either, any more than the Pharisees.

But we now know that God himself in Christ has broken through that impasse: Christ, who is God the Word-made-flesh, has through his Cross fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf, so that our repentance becomes acceptable in Christ and through Christ.

This alone puts Isaiah's promises in their true perspective. St. Luke (Lk 5.27-32) tells us of the call of Levi the tax collector (who later became known as St. Matthew) and of the banquet held by Levi, which Jesus attended, in the company of other tax collectors and sinners. Christ himself, sinless and holy, is not tainted or made ritually impure by keeping company with sinners. Just as our Savior sanctified the waters of the Jordan when he was



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baptized by John the Baptist, so he sanctified and cleansed the sinners and tax collectors who came to his table.

And Christ is still doing so: he still sanctifies and cleanses us, if we allow him to draw us to his side so that we may follow him.