

**Ash Wednesday**  
**Cycles A, B, C RCL**  
**Revised**

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

All we know about the southern prophet Joel is that he spoke during an otherwise unattested locust plague in Palestine. The prophet uses this plague as a metaphor to describe an expected invasion of Judah by unnamed enemies. In 2:1 either Joel or an editor has used the figure of the “day of the Lord,” an expression borrowed from Amos. Unlike Amos, however, our writer believes that Judah’s repentance can and will bring salvation. The chapter concludes with a glorious vision of the victory of God over Judah’s enemies.

**or**

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

The so-called “Third Isaiah” (Isaiah 56-66) contains oracles of hope like those of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and oracles of warning and doom like today’s lesson. These warning oracles appear to stem from the end of the sixth century BC, after the return from exile in Babylon and during the difficult days in Jerusalem when residents both tried to eke out a living and rebuild the Temple and restore its worship. The author warns readers to avoid the religiosity associated with Temple worship that substitutes form and ritual for doing the law of the Lord in relationship to neighbors. Indeed, one failing is that the Israelites would rather engage in bickering about religious ritual than do the works of justice and mercy God requires. It is interesting that this speech of the Lord bears none of the marks of the structured judgment speeches given by the pre-exilic prophets. In particular, the lack of messenger formulas like “thus says the Lord” or “the word of the Lord came to” leaves out the prophet as the “mouthpiece of Yahweh,” an expression older scholarship employed to refer to the classical prophetic forms.

**Psalm 103: (1-7), 8-14, (15-22)**

This *hymn* is an *enthronement psalm* that celebrates God’s kingship over all things. The psalm joins the refrain of heavenly beings with that of humans to celebrate the quality of justice and mercy with which God exercises this rule. Although a *hymn* in structure, many interpreters have pointed to the similarity of this psalm to the thanksgiving psalms, especially in verses 3-18.

**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**

During his sojourn in Ephesus Paul became engaged in a dispute with certain members of the church in Corinth over their overly enthusiastic, charismatic practices. Evidently, things became so serious that Paul made a brief visit to Corinth to try to improve things; but this mission was a failure, ending with an angry letter from Paul to the Corinthians that we find partially preserved in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Today’s reading is a fragment of a follow-up letter Paul wrote in which he adopts some of his opponents’ ideas without compromising his own witness.

The difficult phrase in 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin (NRSV),” is taken by some interpreters to mean that Christ has become an atoning sacrifice for sin. The prevailing view, however, is that for our sake God treated Christ as a sinner despite the fact that Christ had no experience of sin.

The truth of Paul’s ministry, the apostle claims, is shown not by his gifts of the Spirit but by his willingness to suffer for the gospel.

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of short sayings of Jesus preserved in the Q-document (the written source of Jesus’ sayings used by Matthew and Luke). In Luke, a shorter version of this collection appears as the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49). Matthew 6:1 organizes the material in the next 18 verses under the general heading of avoiding religious ostentation.

Like the Pharisees and the Rabbis after them, Jesus valued *kavanah*, the intention of the heart, above all in matters of worship.

