

Ash Wednesday, 2009

“O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise”

This year, even more than last year, which wasn't long after my mother's death, I am acutely aware of the symbols of Ash Wednesday: ash, dust, incineration; the sign of the cross. The recent bush fires blaze out at us, with their ashen images confronting us with mortality. And our world at large seems more shattered and unfixable than ever. Every news broadcast brings us untimely death and brokenness as our daily companion.

So, we have an awareness of these external forces for adversity which impinge on our lives and well-being; but Ash Wednesday, the beginning of this season of Lent, confronts us with something even more desolate and absolute – the struggles within that can break us. None of us is immune. The Bible pulls no punches in the words it uses, as we heard in the Psalm today: our offenses, our wickedness, sin, evil, our brokenness. Not popular words to use these days. But we can't avoid them; they're words that are personal in their usage (they're words meant for ourselves to own, and not for “those out there”); and they also describe a world and consequences where people – ourselves included – don't live in the way God intends and calls us to live.

Confronting reminders of our mortality form the backdrop on this Ash Wednesday: not only the symbol of ashes, but the disturbing words spoken as ashes are smeared on our foreheads, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return!” Do we need this reminder of the fragility of life? Isn't there enough in life around us that makes the denial of loss and death nearly impossible? These are stark words.

How can we forget that we are dust? Yet we do; we can step aside from the needs of this world, from the needs of those around us, and indeed from the claims of God, as we pay attention to things of our own lives – not necessarily frivolous things, but the things we believe we need, but –let's face it –we don't. In these Ash Wednesday words and symbolism, we are reminded of the reality of what is: that we are fragile – in bodies that will deteriorate and die and end up as ashes, as dust; and with hearts and minds that carry all sorts of brokenness; hearts and minds that require discipline and focus and ongoing forgiveness and healing as we negotiate the challenges and struggles and failures to follow Christ as we ought in our daily lives.

Here in Lent, we're called to look inward and consider how we live in this world. We are given particular occasion to reassess what our treasure is, where our heart is. Of course we can do this at any time of the year –but should that be an excuse to bypass the special character and opportunity that Lent affords us? We are invited to

renew and refresh our discipleship, to pinpoint shadowy aspects of our lives to be brought under the influence of the gospel, to allow hidden corners to be exposed to the light.

This is an opportunity to delve deep, to wrestle with what it is that gets in the way of giving ourselves to the fullness of life that God has for us. It is a time for putting on hold –even emptying ourselves from - the seductive claims of the world, which can so feed our sense of self and which can so inflate our reckoning of ourselves. It's not difficult in this world to be enticed into a life where we are motivated by success and satisfaction, by possession and achievement, and even in the Church, to be seduced into thinking that the things we do for church and God, is all that is necessary for faith. It's not, is it? It may well be an expression of our faith, but we're falling short of God's yearnings for us, if our faith life begins and ends with doing things. And what does God yearn for? On one dimension, hearts and lives that seek and do justice, as the Isaiah reading drummed out, and equally, "truth in the inward being", "a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" as the Psalm laments. Or, more colloquially:

*I know I can't fool you with hollow religion, God.
.....I could perform all the rituals perfectly, by the book,
.....but it wouldn't mean anything to you.*

*What you want to see is a genuine heart-felt sorrow for wrongdoing,
.....and a commitment to a total life-change.
You will never turn away anyone who comes to you heartbroken
.....and promising to turn their lives around to face you and follow your ways.*

The text from Matthew for tonight speaks clearly of how we can deceive and inflate ourselves even in the setting of our religious practices: "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them*". – we do not do our outward works of piety – praying and giving alms, helping others, going without -to show off, for pride, but we do them "in secret" where God alone knows our hearts. No matter what the outward marks, the ash on our forehead, the service we offer to the church, the work we are called to on this day and for the duration of Lent, is an **inner work**.

Though this process of self-reflection and facing our inward damage, self- deceit and brokenness may be painful, the letting go of the masks we put on to impress God and others will ultimately lead us to light and life in Christ. With God's grace, we may shed the things of this world and make room for God to fill us. And God can't fill us unless we make space and open ourselves for his filling of us. This is the promise that draws us on through this penitential time. We are called to rediscover

who we are as God's people. We are called to face our fears and our failures with courage and dignity, relying on God's love and mercy, not on our own strength and good intentions – this is the work of God's grace and the Holy Spirit. And we are called to be God's children. The sign of the cross on our foreheads serves not only to remind us that we are dust, but serves as a reminder that God has a claim on us in Baptism.

This day, we remember that we are ash – and we set our hearts and minds on following God's call to turn our hearts and lives to follow him, absolutely, deeply and in penitence and faith.

Amen