

Ash Wednesday 2021 – Fr. Mike.

- John 8.1-11

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Lent, and many other aspects of our lives this year, is distinctively different. Coronavirus has frustrated much of what we wanted to attend or achieve, and the prevailing colours of our life are grey at best, and for the most part, black ...

From a global perspective (with a population of 7.8 billion) the level of havoc caused by this deadly virus is catastrophic. At the time of writing, Coronavirus has infected one hundred million (100,000,000) people; although 55.4 million (55,400,000) souls have actually recovered from Covid-19; and 2.16 million people have lost their battle and been killed by it.

Total cases	Recovered	Deaths
100M 100,000,000	55.4M 55,400,000	2.16M

Clearly, these statistics are tragic.

There is perhaps another more hopeful way of thinking about this particular pandemic and its impact which almost turns a 'problem' into an opportunity. So that, wherever you are geographically on this day of obligation (whether in church, hospital, work or at home) you are nevertheless able to worship 'according to your several necessities' as individuals, but more importantly, *in communion* with all faithful people.

Story

A priest promised one of his congregation who was searching, a revelation of greater consequence than anything contained in scripture. When the Christian asked for it eagerly, the priest said – “Right, go out into the pouring rain, raise your head and your arms towards heaven...and stand there. That will bring the first revelation.”

So, the congregation member did exactly that. The next day he returned to give his report to the priest. “I followed your advice, and water went down my neck, I was drenched, I looked silly, and I felt like a perfect fool!” The priest answered, “Well, for the first day, that’s quite a revelation isn’t it?!”

We look stupid, with a bit of ash smeared on our head. Indeed, it will never catch on as a fashion (nor should it) BUT it reminds us of our roots, of what we are, and of what we are to become...

And so, to our Scripture

First of all, most people (scholars) are quite convinced that this story from John is not authentic – in other words they think it was added later. It is absent from all the earliest manuscripts. As far as anyone knows, in contrast to the rest of scripture, it is not inspired.

Yet, it still rings true, and certainly sounds like Jesus, so we are still asked to reflect upon it on this Ash Wednesday. Let’s poke a little deeper...

Jesus sits down at the temple mount to teach the crowds, when he is rudely interrupted by some troublemakers trying to trap him, again. This time, it concerns a woman who was apparently caught **‘in the very act’** of adultery. So, my first thought is – were they spying or was this some kind of a set-up, that they caught her ‘in the act’?

Secondly, where is the man? If they **‘brought unto him a woman taken in adultery’** logic suggests they would catch him too? The whole thing smells of rotten fish!

They humiliated the woman (**'had her stand in the midst'**) by making her stand in the middle of the group, while they announced to anyone within earshot on the temple mount that SHE WAS CAUGHT IN ADULTERY, asking Jesus if he approves of stoning her.

If he says 'no', then he disobeys the Law of Moses. If he says 'yes', he comes across as cruel and no friend of sinners. The conundrum being, is God loving, or is he Just; because in this case (say the officials) he certainly cannot be both loving *and* Just. Consequently, the Scribes and Pharisees are pleased with themselves for cooking up a really devious trap. In response, Jesus **'stooped down'** and seemingly ignored them, choosing to doodle in the dust, and let the scene work itself into a frenzy **'as though he heard them not.'**

Finally, Jesus stands to speak, and the crowds listen in anticipation. **"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."** Or put another way, Judge her if you must, but ONLY if you are without sin yourself, and take the seat of Judge, OTHERWISE you may be the next one 'caught in the very act' of something, and thrown into the centre of the wolf ring.

The only one who is fit to judge then, is the one who is sinless.

Clever stuff from Jesus, because now the pressure is effectively reversed. If the Pharisees call for her to be stoned to death, then *they* are claiming to be without sin (i.e. perfect).

On the other hand if they walk away, then Jesus is not trapped.

Consequently, by giving them the perfect answer, Jesus has outwitted them *again* and they know it, because one by one **'being convicted by their own conscience'** and unable to take the position of Judge, they each left the scene. Once everyone had trickled away, Jesus, in mock surprise (**'where are those thine accusers?'**) asks the woman **'hath no man**

condemned thee?’ She replies, **‘no man, Lord.’** The encounter ends with Jesus delivering his final masterstroke with the words **‘neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.’**

He is therefore both loving AND Just, compassionate AND fair. Fair but definitely not weak.

He is loving but not lawless.

What might this mean for us now?

Today, our pretensions are stripped away, and we are asked (like the woman in the Gospel story) to simply return home and leave our life of sin (our wrong relationship with God) behind.

Those who can actually attend an Ash Wednesday service will leave church with a black cross prominently displayed on their forehead - graphically reminded that although we came from dust, and will eventually return to it, as Christians we are currently required to risk humiliation and misunderstanding if we intend to walk in the way of Jesus.

In 2021, with death and disease surrounding us perhaps more harshly this year than most, you might well ask the searching question: ‘why am I still here?’

The answer is deceptively simple: we are still here on earth because **we do not know enough about life in general and our faith in particular to be ready enough to die!**

So, we begin our important season of preparation by receiving our personal cross of ashes, symbolising this journey of contrition. Some of us will do so literally, others emotionally.

On this first day of Lent, when we traditionally reflect upon our own brand of spiritual malaise and chaos, matching this with Jesus doodling in the dust on the temple mount all those years ago with an accused woman, we are reminded that **without God we are no more than dust and ashes.**

In the company of Christ, as we rehearse that journey through the wilderness during the next six weeks of Lent, we might learn to follow his example – if we are open enough to be humble and contrite.

Some practical suggestions

As we are all unique, our spiritual enlightenment will depend upon how we choose to prioritise the 24 hours given to us each day.

Many choose to do this by reflecting on their life and faith. Some choose to make more time for prayer and reading the Bible (or some other edifying work/study). Others will fast; give something up, or perhaps simply take on something new such as a service that you would not normally attend. Some pledge to give to charity or practice random acts of kindness.

If you are the kind of person who needs practical targets and a more disciplined routine is helpful to you, then perhaps on each new day, over this 40-day period, you might decide to select one item in your home (or piece of clothing in your wardrobe that you have not used in a while) and put it to one side. Then, at the end of this Lent you will have gathered 40 'items' to present to the charity shop of your choice?

If on the other hand, you are seeking some kind of guidance for a deeper understanding, or a fresh integrity to your existing faith, then perhaps the gentle service of 'Compline by Candlelight' might be just the right combination of 'wilderness' and 'wonder'; to cherish and challenge you during this particular Lent experience on your horizon?

Sometimes however, our experience shows that our religious convictions bear as much relation to our personal holiness as a man's dinner jacket does to his digestion!

You know the kind of thing – the 'Lenten face' combined with a dull repetition of what you *simply did last year because that is what you always do in Lent...* Please try not to revert to the sad approach of habit or laziness, because you will risk missing the opportunity to grow.

In spiritual terms, try to think of Ash Wednesday as the first day of 'Spring' which literally marks the first day of a new season. 40 opportunities for 'spiritual athletics' that everyone (with the appropriate attitude) is capable of achieving. Forty 'growing pains' that give birth to a new life in Christ! Ideally then, a deepening process (and despite Coronavirus) a time of fresh experiences and commitment to the faith of Christ crucified.

Final story

One night, a fisherman crept into the grounds of a very rich man who owned a lake full of fish, but the owner heard him, and set the security guards on him. When the fisherman/thief saw the guards searching for him with dogs and lighted torches, the fisherman/thief hastily smeared himself with ashes and sat under a tree (as is the custom with holy men in India) so that the guards were fooled. All they found was 'a holy man sitting under a tree absorbed in meditation.'

The next day, word spread everywhere that a great Sage had decided to take up residence in the grounds of a rich man. People gathered with flowers and gifts in accordance with the pious belief that gifts made to the holy man bring God's blessing upon the giver. The fisherman-thief/turned Sage was astounded at his good luck. "It is easier to make a living out of the faith of these people than by the toil of my own hands," he thought to himself. So he continued to meditate and never went back to his former life and work again.

Each of us sets our heart on what we count important. This allegiance determines the direction and content of our life. Put another way – 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' The cross you carry on your Lenten pilgrimage will be personal - unique to you. Furthermore, **it will mark your very soul**. If you come to church, your forehead will reflect this fact symbolically, although the cross eventually disappears and the dust also settles. Nevertheless, there is still a measure of turbulence because your heart remains in a constant state of re-birth as God continues to work on you and me to **love us to death**, as with his Son and our Lord.

Conclusions

If we are 'Ash-ed' in whatever form, this season will change us; if we sincerely long for '**new and contrite hearts**' and truly accept our cross wherever that may lead; if we can honestly bring ourselves to stand upright and be counted, witnessing to our saviour who continues to love and forgive us (*even when we ignore him*); then His Kingdom will come!

However, before Christ can sanctify us, we need to get our hands dirty – poke around in the dust – look at the hidden areas within and attempt to clean things up. Battle faithfully then, towards the '**God of all mercy**' against all that is dark, uncomfortable, ugly and/or frightening. Remember that however and wherever you trace your cross, eventually it will fade. Yet in truth, it is still there! Even in your blackest of moods or your darkest hour, as sure as Christ is there, your cross is there as a perpetual challenge:

Waiting, to be **revealed** again - to those '**worthily lamenting**'... Waiting, to be **used** again as a suitable instrument of service...Waiting, to be **loved** by an Almighty God who despite our best efforts to ignore him remains an '**everlasting God who hatest nothing**'...

Always on our minds; forever on our hearts, before, during and after Covid-19.

Amen!



Fr. Mike, Ash Wednesday 2021.

