

Ash Wednesday Sermon 2017

From ashes to life

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The themes of the liturgy and the readings of Ash Wednesday are powerful and important – that dynamic and profound mix of repentance and forgiveness. I hope that each one of us in this service tonight will feel the promptings of the Holy Spirit in different ways – we may feel conscious of a particular sin, or amazed by an experience of grace – we are all in different places on our spiritual journey, we have different personalities – but if we are open to the Holy Spirit, we will not go unaffected by tonight’s service– there is truth here, healing here, grace here, an opportunity for repentance here.

For some repentance may have a harsh ring. Some of us have grown up with a sense of God’s condemnation ringing in our ears. Some of us have drunk too deeply from the well of unworthiness and not deeply enough from the cup of grace. Others have been too drawn into our modern culture’s ideas of our own self-importance – we’ve bought into the ‘me-generation’ and our own brilliance.

Most of us are a complex mix of both.

It’s incredibly hard to get the balance right between acknowledging our sin and knowing we are forgiven. We are either too hard on ourselves, or not hard enough. Ash Wednesday is a day when we try to get the balance right. Reboot the system – be open to repentance, be open to grace.

We come here tonight, at the start of Lent, to mark Ash Wednesday – which is essentially a day of penitence in the church – a day where we humbly say sorry to God for all the things we’ve done wrong – we confess it in front of each other, as brothers and sisters, knowing we are all in the same boat. We all mess up. We all let ourselves down. We all have weaknesses, secret sins, things we don’t like about ourselves, things that don’t want to acknowledge in front of others – that’s the reality of being human – and so when we say the liturgy of penitence together – we say it acknowledging our individual and corporate weakness and frailty. And there is something so good about that. Away from the ‘bravado’ of keeping up appearances, we say to each other and to God – I messed up – I need forgiveness, I need grace, I need your strength to be your disciple, to be a better human being.

And we might think this would feel hard, or like a punishment, or like a colossal ‘being sent to the headteacher’ – but it doesn’t. And it surprises me every time that it doesn’t. Telling the truth about ourselves to each other and to God – unlocks something up in the economy of salvation (the way God works in our lives to save us) – and what we experience is not a colossal telling off, but rather grace and forgiveness.

Even before our words are uttered – grace comes with love and wholeness and forgiveness and freedom – and a lightness in our spirit. We find ourselves at peace and aware that we are known and loved by God.

This is the experience of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus doesn’t condemn her, or judge her – his actions are healing, strengthening, protective. He doesn’t shout, he doesn’t stone, he doesn’t ignore, he doesn’t hate, he isn’t self-righteous, but he does call the woman to live a better life. He doesn’t do this through judgement – but by the gift of his presence, his love, his holiness

and his grace – so that when he says – “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” she would have felt his pardon and peace, giving her the inspiration to live a different life.

We encounter Christ like this (perhaps in a smaller way, but no less significantly) in worship, in prayer, in the scriptures and in receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion. We are suddenly startled by his grace and called to new life.

But we could also be startled by his grace and anywhere and everywhere – God’s grace is not trapped in church – we can sense the Holy Spirit on the bus, out on a walk, at work, with the people we love, all alone – he is there beside us, calling us into new life – calling us to be his whole-hearted disciples.

This six week period of Lent is a time when we intentionally focus on our spiritual lives – in order to be even more aware of God’s presence in our lives. It’s a period of abstinence and self-denial. A period of almsgiving. A period of spiritual preparation – in readiness for Holy Week and Easter.

That is not about spending 6 weeks with ash on our forehead – in repentance. That is rather about receiving that grace and forgiveness on Ash Wednesday and then committing to 6 weeks of spiritual focus – intentionally focussing on our spiritual lives – to grow and deepen who and what we are as Christians.

Fasting can be part of that – perhaps we give up chocolate, alcohol, meat, social media.

Silence can be part of that – perhaps we get up 10 minutes earlier, watch less TV, switch off the radio, and use the additional silence to sit in God’s presence.

Gratitude can be part of that – perhaps we take up a practise of ending the day by prayerfully writing down 3 things we’re grateful for.

Isaiah challenges us about the kind of fasting we should be about – he brings God’s word to us: calling us not to be hypocrites or self-focussed, but to fast in a way that brings the values of God’s kingdom into play – justice and peace, love of neighbour, serving and helping others :

“Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

How might you live that kind of fast this Lent? At work are there ways you can loose the bonds of injustice? How might you let the oppressed go free? These are huge themes – global in proportion – but there are oppressed people all around us, hungry people, lonely people, vulnerable people – can our lives be seasoned with the love and grace of Christ – be lived in such a way as to bring hope to them?

Think about the next 6 weeks. Think about what Lent will be about for you.

- Choose to do something that helps you get closer to God. (prayer, bible study, reading a spiritual book).

- Give up something that helps you to be more disciplined and focussed.
- Take up something that helps you to live the kind of fast Isaiah is calling us to.

But know that you are loved by God, forgiven in Christ, touched by grace and sustained by the Holy Spirit. You are not ground down by unworthiness or shunned from God's presence. You are beloved children of God. Live worthy of that calling. Amen.

(Revd Sheridan James, sermon notes, Ash Wednesday 2017)