

Ash Wednesday: 16 February 2010

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Psalm 103; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Psalm 51

Take my lips O God and speak through them; take our minds and think with them. Take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

Each Ash Wednesday I am reminded of the words of the committal in the burial service, "...we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." There is no mixed message here. The words are jarring in their truth; there is no running away from the fact that death has occurred. But as a society we go to such great lengths to disguise death. I cannot tell you how many times at a church wake or funeral home I have heard someone say, "She looks so good" or "He looks so natural"? And, really mean it! The person in the casket hardly looks dead at all. The embalmer's art, soft, pastel lights overhead at the funeral home to cast the perfect glow, an upholstered casket that looks, well, comfortable – all contribute to the illusion. When we come to the cemetery, the gravesite is draped with a green, grass-like cloth. It goes over the sides and down into the grave. It doesn't look like a hole in the ground at all, and the mound of earth that will cover the grave is generally no-where to be seen.

Finally, after the committal, the family is gently ushered away. Seldom does anyone stay long enough to see the casket lowered into the ground. And if you go back to the cemetery later in the day, the ground is covered with flowers. You couldn't find the spot where you stood and wept if you had to. We remove ourselves as far as possible from physical death. It's understandable, because death is painful, and who wants to hurt? We don't come easily to the end of relationships with those we have loved. When you lose a loved one, there are no words adequate to express the grief.

Yet, on this Ash Wednesday we begin a journey that will take us to the cross, where Jesus died a brutal death. It is sad and scary to stand at the foot of the cross and watch Jesus die. Watching Jesus die must have been a horrible experience for those present who loved him most. There was no comfortable disguise of death that day. When they took his body down from the cross, there was no easy way to remove the nails from his hands and feet. There was no embalming makeup or flattering lights, just a tortured, dead body for everyone to see. No one wants to stand near a cross and see a man die. It is too awful, too wrenching, so we distance ourselves. Life is difficult enough without being reminded of the pain of death. The truth is, living and dying can be painful. We will continually be challenged, disappointed, and hurt over and over again. That is why we need to be reminded of the Resurrection, as many times as it takes. We will all die, either by degrees or suddenly, and draw our last breath. We know it is coming. Along the way we will visit our own Garden of Gethsemane, and face the tomb. But all these experiences become bearable when we know that Jesus has been there before us. We handle life's hardships much better when we are reminded that life with Jesus doesn't end on Friday at the cross. Sunday is coming and with it, victory over death.

The power of Ash Wednesday- the opportunity of this day is to ***come clean***. Our nature is to hide the truth from ourselves. None of us wants to be

caught, none of us want to admit our failures, none of us wants to bear the pain of our actions, so we deny, we pretend, we keep secrets. But Ash Wednesday calls us to a season of confession and honesty: confession of our vulnerability, confession of our own brokenness, confession of our sins, and confession of our need for God. Psalm 51 is not just David's prayer, but our own, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit."

At baptism, new Christians receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads, and we say they are "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever." They are marked with a corporate identity as children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, citizens of the household of faith and the kingdom of God. Chrism is used in marking their foreheads. Here at St. Columba's we use a lot of it symbolizing the abundance of God's grace and love poured upon us. The Chrism is nearly clear, so it is hard to discern the mark of the cross. But on Ash Wednesday, as we are marked with the sign of the cross, the sign is clearly visible to everyone we encounter.

In a few moments, you will be invited to come forward to have ashes smeared on your forehead. *And* the ashes remind us that we are fallen, and we can't get up on our own. We need God's help. We need God's forgiveness and God's grace. We need God's love. And that, brothers and sisters, is the hope that is smeared in ash on our foreheads; that God's love has reached through our sinfulness, through the grim shadow of death, to the dust and the ashes of human life. As Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "we are treated as dying, and see – we are alive." We may be dust, but dust that we are, we are loved. We have nothing, and yet by God's love we have everything. Nothing in this world, not even death, can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. That is the secret scratched in ashes and imposed upon our foreheads. Nothing can separate you from God's love.

From the ashes of last year's palms, the ashes of our heartbreak and defeat, our unmet expectations and broken dreams, the ashes of our knowledge that we fall short – from the ashes - God's voice calls us to travel the painful journey to the cross. Today we begin that journey. Remember where it ends and your way will be graced with hope.

R. Logan Duncan