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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023

Lectionary Year A: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Years ago, Christians of many of the liturgical faith traditions -- a number of Episcopalians included -- observed Ash Wednesday with no ashes. The practice of "imposing" ashes on people's foreheads smacked of Roman Catholicism, and if two branches of Christianity ever resembled the Soviet Union and the United States in the Cold War, they most certainly would've been Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. There was no thaw in this particular cold war until Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, which began in 1962. Over the decades that followed "Vatican Two," many faith traditions discovered that there were more similarities than difference between themselves and Roman Catholics, and were even willing to learn about and adapt elements of the Catholic faith (some of which may have been unfairly jettisoned during the Protestant Reformation or sometime thereafter).

For the truly stubborn, though, there would remain justifiable reasons to resist the introduction of "Romish" practices such as the Imposition of Ashes in our faith communities. All anyone needed to do was read the Gospel text from Matthew that has been appointed for every Ash Wednesday for decades. Right off the top, Jesus himself says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1a). Many have interpreted this as a prohibition against a visible observance of a day such as Ash Wednesday with big, black crosses on everyone's foreheads. But if that's the case, why bother referring to this day as Ash Wednesday?

Furthermore, long before Christianity came into existence, ashes were symbolic of penitence; if one was atoning for a sin that one had committed, ashes were applied as a sign of contrition. By the sixth century, A.D., ashes came into use by Christians in Gaul (present-day France), and by the Middle Ages their use had become widespread throughout Europe.

I mention all of this in order to provide some context for what we're about to do this evening, and, in addition to that, I will point out that Ash Wednesday orients us to the meaning and spirit of the season of Lent. This evening, we embark on a forty-day voyage through the depths of human suffering, anguish, and pain. Now, to an outsider, this may seem like the least enticing aspect of Christianity anyone could offer! But here, we don't gloss over or minimize these realities simply because they're unpleasant or off-putting; no, we acknowledge and walk right through them so that we can identify with our Lord Jesus and our Lord Jesus can identify with us. And, in a broader context, allow me to ask the question: How can we celebrate the joy of the Resurrection without first walking the Way of the Cross to Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday?

In that spirit, we begin our forty-day voyage.

And as we prepare for our Lord's Resurrection through this season of Lent, we adopt an outward sign of penitence in the crosses of ashes on our foreheads; this evening is once again an opportunity to repent of our sins and let God's grace form us into the loved and forgiven -- and loving and forgiving -- people God created us to be. In order to get there, though, we need to be humbled by the reality that we are mortal -- and as impermanent as the dust that flies away. That's what this evening's ashes are there for...

Related to the need for humility is the eradication of any desire for recognition. This is in keeping with the call of Jesus himself. When you give alms, do not sound a trumpet (Matthew 6:2a). When you pray, do not do so publicly and visibly (Matthew 6:5b). When you fast, do not disfigure your face (Matthew 6:16b). This could be applied to virtually every corner of human existence; it's a matter of doing the right thing because it's good, not because it'll get us some kind of recognition. Anything that feeds the ego -- instead of feeding someone or something in need -- has no place here.

Certainly, I can see how something as visible as ashes on our foreheads could be used to serve one's ego; moreover, broadcasting how "holy" one is is not a holy thing to do at all! But are we doing it for that reason? Hopefully not! Ashes are applied this evening to orient us in the opposite direction...toward humility, penitence, and unselfish self-offering.

In this evening's Gospel, Jesus lifts up prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which are often identified as the "classic" disciplines for the season of Lent. Why pray? Why fast? Why give alms, or assistance to the poor? Simply put, these are ways in which we can purify our minds, bodies, and souls over the course of the next forty days in preparation for the celebration of our Lord's Resurrection at Easter. But are these the only ways? Absolutely not! In fact, you might think of them as a beginning and then get creative. The fast, for example, is often practiced by "giving something up for Lent." But why must it -- as it usually does -- only have something to do with you? Could it be something that affects, or ceases to affect, your neighbor? Say, for example, a fast from pettiness or negativity? Think of how much better you'll feel and function after eradicating that from your system for forty days!

And, of course, I don't want to leave out prayer and almsgiving. As for prayer, we include meditations on Christ's crucifixion and death in our Stations of the Cross devotions here on Friday evenings during Lent, and, to that, we may add devotional readings or the prayerful study of a book. The latter of these is a specific offering for the Wednesday's in Lent at St. Anne's, and you can sign up and be fed intellectually and spiritually through that. And as for almsgiving, our congregation already has a robust tradition of supporting charities and non-profit organizations in the community, but you can personalize this a bit more as a Lenten discipline by volunteering at one of these, or, if that isn't an option for you, you can give to the Rector's Discretionary Fund. On a personal note, one of the greatest gifts I receive when the Discretionary Fund helps someone is the genuine gratitude that needy people express to me. In turn, I have you to thank for your generosity when I'm able to help someone.

As with everything else, Jesus calls us to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving without our egocentric need for recognition. Don't even show off those ashes on your forehead -- keep your head bowed in penitence if you must! Prepare yourself this evening for this forty-day voyage into the events in which God's love for you is most profoundly revealed -- in the trials, temptations, sufferings, and death of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The promise is sure: In dying, we will die with Christ; in Christ, we will rise with him. And through his suffering, we will be assured that we will never suffer alone; instead, the one who walked a path of suffering for us will always walk the path of suffering with us. And, thanks to him, we will never be defeated; indeed, we will endure.

So, humble yourselves, receive the ashes, and continue to be a disciple of Christ

and with Christ...not because it'll get you something that you want, like recognition, but rather because it'll get you something you need, like salvation. The dust to which you shall return is but the passage to the eternal life to which you shall rise. This is the mystery that our Lord invites us into this evening and always.

Amen.