

## Ash Wednesday, Eucharist

Isaiah 58:1-12, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Father Christopher

One of the anxieties which we can suffer from in the church is the constant pressure to be doing new and creative things to attract people to the church: some churches use screens; others have liturgical dance with chiffon scarves. Sadly for you I think it's fair to say that neither Mother Emma nor I see these things as among our particular gifts.

It is therefore reassuring, and fascinating, to see the continued importance which people attach to Ash Wednesday. Indeed, this year we are having three Eucharists, because last year at Evening Prayer we were rather overwhelmed by people expecting one, and there for their ashing, many of whom we had not seen before.

For what my opinion's worth, though I will be very interested in your own view afterwards, I think there are two principal reasons:

Firstly, I think people like concrete things, proof even. If you have finished a course, or taken an exam, you like to have a certificate as tangible evidence don't you? And in case that sounds a bit too materialistic, this is why we have sacraments too. As I probably repeat a little too often, Christianity is not a philosophy: we believe that God is present in the particularity of our time and place, just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in a manger, on a particular day in a particular year. God is in the real, in the here and now, and this is emphasised in the way in which we receive Him in the bread and the wine in the Eucharist and in the water of baptism. The sacraments all involve physical matter, stuff, which is an outward sign of an inner grace, in the classic definition. There are other things which are not quite sacraments, but which do a similar thing – we call them sacramentals. Coronation might be described as one, and ashing is another. Our use of physical things, of stuff, takes on a special significance, and reminds us of a deeper truth.

But the second reason, which answers the question of what that deeper truth is, is that in our materialistic, often shallow, world, we like to be reminded I think that this is not what it's all about; even as we often give in to the temptation of such worldly ways. When we ash you shortly, we will say to each of you, individually, *'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'* These are the words which God says to Adam as he and Eve leave the garden of Eden. Harsh words perhaps, and yet we know them to be true. We are all subject to sin, as descendants of Adam,

whether we like it or not, and we will all die. It seems particularly profound when we say these words to our school children as we ash them.

Yet in a world in which this reality is pushed out of our consciousness, as we are told that we can forever look younger and get richer, because we're worth it; and that we can all live our own truth, because to be limited by anyone or anything beyond ourselves is to limit our self-expression; Actually – actually, deep down we know that this is a lie. For we will all die; none of us individually has the answer to the big questions we ask about what we're doing it all for; and we cannot live a truly happy and fulfilled existence in our own strength.

All of these truths are made manifest, and *admitted*, in this simple act of having a small ash cross rubbed onto your forehead. In doing that we admit that life will have its end; that we seek the truth beyond our own capacities; and that we can rely on God to sustain and fulfil us. And when we admit that, what a sigh of relief - we can breath! For all our dreams of our own power and worth, what a delight to be able to own up to their being castles in the air. Yet once we do that, and turn away from those fantasies we kid ourselves with, rather than having nothing left, we instead know ourselves to be loved precisely for being just who we are: for being Emma, or Pat or Simon or Christopher.

Learning to value ourselves and see ourselves as God sees us is a lifetime's work. Most of us oscillate between being too proud, and seeing ourselves as better than others, and lacking self-worth – thinking we don't deserve the esteem and love others give us. In this simple symbol, and through fasting, prayer and acts of service throughout Lent, we see a glimpse of ourselves as God sees us. He looked at **all** his creation and saw that it was good – he loved us into existence, and could not have created us if we were not created good. And yet the paradox of our creation is that we cannot go it alone. We are created for dependence on God and for worship of Him.

Today as we begin Lent, let us turn, like the Prodigal Son, away from the anxiety of our own hubris, of needing to prove ourselves constantly to the world around us, and instead know that God provides all that we need. Let us turn away from our pride, which is the twin of our anxiety, and simply rest our face on his chest and let Him embrace us.

We may only be dust, and destined to return to it, but it is enough. It is enough.

Amen