

Ash Wednesday, 14th February 2018

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It's one of those years when Ash Wednesday creeps up on us too soon. It's not the most popular holy day in the calendar, and this year there's a rival attraction for some, involving red roses and pink Champagne. Given the great cold-water deluge of Scripture we've just had, we may be feeling a wee bit envious. But let's be brave and face, not the music but the message!

The OT passage from Isaiah and the Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount both have sharp warnings against hypocrisy. In the first, the warning is against doing all the right religious things – prayer, worship, even fasting – but then complaining that God doesn't seem to notice: they're not getting any observable reward. But God won't be manipulated, and anyway what he wants is not us groveling in sackcloth and ashes, but to give practical care for the hungry and homeless, for those oppressed by injustice. *Then* our light would rise in the darkness; then we would be like a never-failing spring of water. That would be the reward.

Jesus's warning against hypocrisy is not about trying to bribe God, but about using the outward signs of piety to get admiration from others: going through the motions of penitence in order to impress people. I'm sure we all want to shun that kind of thing, but it can creep up on us in sneaky ways. In public, if we see people noticing the cross of ash on our foreheads, can we honestly say that we've never felt even just a touch of superiority, a faintest whisper of pride that people are noticing this sign of our humility and mortal frailty? Better to wash our face and not look gloomy or unsightly, says Jesus.

Maybe that's just me, but it's an example of how even the best things can also lead us into temptation. Our motives are never perfect, never unmixed. This is inevitable: we are at the same time creatures of the earth with unruly instincts for survival – 'dust we are, and to dust we shall return;' *and also* we are children of the Most High, 'little lower than the angels.' Today we acknowledge that: acknowledge both our weakness and our strength. And notice how in all of those Scriptures there's not only admonishment, but a real gleam of light. Even if we ever feel a total failure, hopeless about ourselves, 'the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.' And St Paul, 'punished, yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, poor yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing all things.'

Do you ever, even just occasionally, find you can not only speak but actually *feel* those words, 'we are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table.' Well of course we aren't, ever. But we don't have to be. 'Christ died for us while we were sinners.' We don't have to prove ourselves to God ('Look at me, how well I'm doing'). In Christ, God gives himself – unconditionally – to make us more whole.

Sometimes, on a really bad day, we may not *feel* loving towards anyone, not even to those we know we really love. In that mood it's hard to accept the message; but at some point we can come back to that basic kernel of the Christian Gospel of God's grace – that we can love only because God loves us first. Our loving – real love, which lasts

long after the pink bubbly has gone flat – is a reflection in us of the one source of true love. (Just as we can't really forgive without knowing the God-given gift of forgiveness in our heart.) 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.' And we all know 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' to bring us to eternal life. It is to reopen ourselves to this that we come here today to acknowledge our frailty, and then to receive the forgiveness and the strengthening food Christ offers us.

And *then*, to clear some space, shed some hindrances, for a refreshing Lent. Ah, Lent. Do we give something up, or take something on? Surely, it all depends. Giving up can be a bit of a pointless token. But to give up something we'd be better without; or to make a break with something that's got too much hold on us – could be anything from drink to our phones...that can be really positive. *Doing* something worthwhile (to help others, or our own health) can also be positive. But for many, life is already too full, too rushed, to multi-tasked. The last thing they need is yet more to do.

Maybe for most of us, we could do with a bit more space; some quiet, uninterrupted time, which we may well have to plan for and *make*. Or can we simply be more aware of what's around us – just look at the heads-down stream of commuters! Relish the snowdrops in someone's garden; the sunlight catching a building we'd never really noticed; listen to the optimistic blackbird singing from a tree; that child jumping in a puddle ... or just *stop*, if only for a few seconds.

Some of you will know this poem by R.S.Thomas. If you don't, I've put one or two unauthorized copies at the back – to look at not take away, please. If you do know it, it's worth re-hearing.

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give up all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

R.S.Thomas