

Remember, Return, Receive

“Blow the trumpet in Zion ...”

“Do not sound a trumpet before you ...”

“Gather the people ...”

“Whenever you pray, go into your room ...”

“Sanctify a fast ...”

“your fasting should not be seen by others ...”

Ash Wednesday is a day of confusing contradictions. And we are just about to participate in the biggest contradiction. Around the world, Christians today have, or will, wilfully and publicly queue to disobey Jesus. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” And yet most of us here will come for the imposition of ashes, an outward sign of the piety that Lent demands of each of us. It is almost as if in order to reinforce that we are but miserable sinners we wilfully sin here in church. Can this wilful disobedience really be the way to begin a journey of repentance and obedience?

You're probably hoping I'm going to say yes, otherwise you've made the effort on a cold February night for nothing!

As embodied creatures, as physical inhabitants in a physical world, what we do with our bodies matters, outward actions can work to change the heart. And so, we begin the inner journey of Lent with the outward sign, not of piety but hopelessness. A sign that tells us to remember, return and receive.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” Stark words. We only really hear words similar to that at funerals, and in a sense, we are all at our own funeral this evening. The time for nicely packaging the message, for softening imagery or hopeful words is over. The truth is that we are dust, and nothing will stop us from returning to dust. Ash Wednesday reminds us shockingly of our own mortality. We might not want to hear it this year, we might want to hear good news instead. But in a sense, this is good news.

The Ash Wednesday liturgy is part of the ongoing liturgy of the Church, we are reminded that we are dust in the context of the meal that points us beyond ourselves. We are reminded of who God is.

In fact, the whole point of the prophecy we heard from Joel isn't really telling the people to act, it is reminding them of the God they serve. The prophet's hope is based solely on God's merciful nature. "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." In our Collect for Ash Wednesday we too are reminded of that truth, "Almighty God who hates nothing that you have made ..." We do not wear a cross of ashes because God hates us but because God loves us. Thomas Merton says of these words, "how good are these words of Wisdom in a time when on all sides the Lord is thought by men to be a God who hates."

In reminding ourselves of who and what we truly are, we are also reminded of the God who took dust and breathed life into it; who took on a body of dust to remind us of the love God has for us; who embraced the mortality of dust in order to open the gates of eternal life. We are reminded that this is the God who calls us to return.

In Joel the people are called repeatedly to return to God. "Return to me with all your heart." In Hebrew thinking the heart was the seat of thinking and

willing, it stood for total dedication. Return. Return. Return. That is the prophet's cry. Come back to where you started, and who knows maybe God will turn to you. George Herbert in his poem Lent pens the same hope, "Perhaps my God, though he be far before, may turn, and take me by the hand." We sit a little longer with our sin in this liturgy, as we use the Litany as our penitence, to remind ourselves that we are called to return in big ways and small ways.

It is also the message of Jesus in the portion of the Sermon of the Mount that we heard in our Gospel. Return to the inner reality of prayer, alms giving and fasting, return to the potential of what God can do in your life if its not just mere show. We know Matthew's Jesus is giving us a new Law, but this Law isn't written on tablets of stone but on our hearts, and hearts are soft things, and things written on them can be forgotten, which is why we are called to return and to remember. We are given the opportunity to examine where our treasure is, for that is where our heart is. Return. Return. Return. As we are ashed so we hear, "turn away from sin and remain faithful to Christ." Return to the reality of living for Christ.

In the sacrament, the “who knows” of the prophet is answered. God has turned to us, has stooped down to us, has taken us by the hand. In this meal we return to the hope of our salvation, our health and our life. In this meal we come home.

And we do so by receiving. I always think the imposition of ashes sound like something that is being forced on us. In truth we are invited to receive, to allow this sign of our mortality, of our sin, of our hope to be placed on us. And somehow in the external marking, that reminds us of who we and God are, that calls us to return, we receive the grace and strength to make that an inner reality. Lent is a journey of receiving. Through prayer, study, self-discipline, charity, we receive the grace to see who we are and know what we can be.

T S Eliot in his poem, Ash Wednesday, writes these words towards the end, “suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood, teach us to care and not to care, teach us to sit still.” We are invited to leave behind the falsehoods that mock us, we are invited to learn again the true things to care about and we are invited to sit still in the presence of the one who has already turned to us.

Maybe we need that image of George Herbert's of God turning to us to offer the hand that leads us on, to remember the God who turns to us and leads us. We need that image of returning to the God who creates out of the dust and goes on creating us as we return to our creator and re-creator. The God who can take the secret things we know about ourselves and shape them and us. We need that image of Elliot's that we are invited to sit still and receive of the grace and mercy of God, to still ourselves in the midst of the chaos and the uncertainty of the world around us.

Those of you who have been preparing for Lent with me might be a bit tired of the Preface for the Eucharistic Prayer in Lent, but it holds all that we begin this evening. It reminds us that this journey we begin, we begin and end with God. Friends, we are dust, but we dust that has life breathed into it by the Creator; we are sinners, but saved by grace through the cross of Jesus Christ; we are mortal but we are changed into immortality and called to live our lives in the light of the eternal. The sacred fast has been called, the pilgrimage has begun, let us be up on our way:

For in these forty days
you lead us into the desert of repentance
that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline

we may grow in grace

and learn to be your people once again.

Through **fasting, prayer** and **acts of service**

you bring us back to your generous heart.

Through **study of your holy word**

you open our eyes to your presence in the world

and free our hands to welcome others

into the radiant splendour of your love.