

Ash Wednesday: Dust, Creation, New Creation

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 14 February 2024

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Shortly we'll receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads with a reminder and a calling: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe in the Gospel." What is this reminder, and what is this calling?

The ashes remind us of our mortality, our fragility, while the dust recalls our belonging to the earth—of our status as creatures and not gods. The ashes also remind us of our complicity in so much that's wrong in the world, recalling how putting ashes on the head was a stark sign of repentance in the Old Testament. As for such repentance, our Old Testament texts tonight remind individuals and the nation that they've betrayed their calling from God, that they're not the fine people they might have imagined. This is something that no-one wants to hear, and especially not in our increasingly shameless era in the grip of what's been called DARVO—an acronym for Deny, Attack, and Reverse-Victim-Order, which means that we're the real victims and not those that our societies oppress, against whom we double down in aggressive self-justification. So: Putin's a victim, Netanyahu's a victim, and Trump's a victim! There's little room in this toxic environment for the communal lament of our Joel passage tonight, or for the heartfelt cry of a soul stripped bare in Psalm 51.

But there's more to the symbol of ashes than penitence. Notice that they're applied to our foreheads in the shape of a cross—the same cross that was marked on our foreheads with water or, in the high-Church tradition, with holy oil at our baptism. This cross pressed on our flesh reminds we frail and compromised human beings that we remain Christ's own despite everything. We are the fellow workers with Christ that Paul describes in our 2 Corinthians reading tonight. In light of which any frailty and fragility we experience in Christian life and ministry—every difficulty and challenge that Paul lists for us in tonight's reading—can be interpreted positively not negatively. Ultimately this is because, in Jesus Christ crucified, weakness can be turned into strength.

There's more to the symbolism of dust, too. Remember the second creation story in Genesis chapter 2, the one featuring Adam and Eve, with a human being created from the dust of the earth. Here, dust is not an end but a beginning. And it can be even more of a beginning, as is made clear in Daniel chapter 12, coming from the middle of the second century before Christ. Here we find the Old Testament's first unmistakable reference to resurrection hope. It comes with the reassurance that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life..." So, from the dust of our first creation also comes the seedbed of our new creation—a novel Old Testament belief that Christians made their own with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Friends, here is the Gospel that we'll shortly be called to repent and believe in. Matthew tells us tonight that we mustn't use our religion to self-justify, to big-note ourselves as more pious than others, to pretend that we've made it with God where others haven't by the way we present

ourselves. All this represents the prideful denial of our actual condition and our need for God's mercy—a mercy that can take us where our own smug self-assessments will not, where our frail mortal condition cannot. This is the Gospel in a nutshell: that we can trust God in his unfailing mercy to hold us close in life and in death. That way, we can make some frank words of the Russian Kontakion our own: “All we go down to the dust. But, weeping at the grave, we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.”

In the meantime, we can be freed from self-justifying nonsense to make a difference in the world—a world increasingly blighted by DARVO, a kingdom of the stubbornly deluded, out of whose clutches we begin our journey to Easter tonight.

The Lord be with you ...