

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
25th February 2009
Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“During Advent we floated in the deep blue of God's embryonic waiting, of God's preparing the world for a scandalous birth. At Christmas we sang with the angels the endless heaven- and earth-filled glory of God-as-babe, and in the white of Epiphany we followed the light of this Christ-in-the-world come to redeem Mary and Elizabeth, Herod and us. Now, in this bruised Lenten purple, the light of Epiphany has led us to dust and desert.

On Ash Wednesday we enter into pure paradox. The gospel reading warns against practicing our piety before others; then we come up to have ashes put on our foreheads. What could be more public? But the church insists we walk though a day outwardly wearing the inward reality of our own mortality not to reward us for our faith but to remind us of our failing.” (Nadia Bolz-Weber)

In the Epistle from St Paul to the Church at Corinth Paul beseeches us to be reconciled to God – and in a reading I selected for this morning's service, Sam Portaro suggests that today's liturgy is all about relationship. Relationship with God. Making right that relationship. Inviting God to return to us – we who from time to time shut out God, we who from time to time place God in a very small box of our own understanding, we who from time to time deny the very essence of God in the stranger.

And it is through reconciliation that we re-enjoy our relationship with our Creator. It is reconciliation and relationship we seek on this Holy Day.

Nadia Bolz-Weber suggest that the reminder of the reality of our own mortality, signified by the dust we will wear on our foreheads, reminds us of our failing. Our reluctance to embrace the God who made us, the God who protects us, the God who loves us. Our willingness to put our own needs first. Our slavish consumerism, our outlandish luxury, the greed exemplified day in and day out by those who really should be putting the interests of those less fortunate ahead of their own.

When we talk about sin, and we do talk about sin almost incessantly during Lent, we need to remember that sin is not just about being naughty. Sin is about being out of relationship with one another, out of relationship with God. Sin is about a broken relationship – and reconciliation is about righting that relationship.

In the article I just wrote for this month's Evangel I talked about giving up resentments for Lent. For some reason, it's been on my mind – perhaps there are one or two that I really do need to give up. But it occurs to me that when I hold a resentment toward someone I am really allowing that resentment to keep a broken relationship broken. Reconciliation cannot occur as long as I hold on to that resentment. The relationship cannot mend as long as that resentment is tearing its very fabric. And when my relationship with someone from my past is broken, so is my relationship with God.

Because God, you see, wants, desperately wants, us to be in relationship with one another. If we believe that God loves,

and we say that we do, is it not possible that God also grieves? I think it is. And I believe that God grieves over our broken relationships and yearns for our reconciliation.

As we enter this Holy Season of Lent, I'm going to try my best to mend some relationships. It's never a good idea to burn one's bridges, and I fear that I've left a few bridges still smoldering. It's not good for me, it's not good for my spiritual or emotional health, and doing my best to repair those bridges is the least I can do to restore some sort of broken relationship to wholeness.

I invite you: As *you* enter this season, is there a bridge you've burned? What could you do to mend it? How could you restore a relationship that was once important and good? How could you bring about reconciliation? Are you afraid of the goodness it might bring?

The ashes of this Wednesday remind us of our mortality and of our failing. Our failing to live fully into covenant with God, our failing to live fully into our Baptism, our failing to bring about healthy relationships and true reconciliation. The ashes aren't for a parade, or, as Jesus says, for a hypocritical sign of piety. They're a reminder.

When you go home, look in the mirror. See the ashes? See the mortality? See the failings?

The ashes remind us to humbly reconcile ourselves to our own mortality and to the mortality of others; to our own failings as well as those we're so quick to judge. And as Walter Bruggemann says in his poem on Ash Wednesday, "This Wednesday dazzles us with gift and newness and possibility."

True reconciliation will move a grieving God to joy. Dazzling joy. Newness of life. the possibility of peace.

True reconciliation, true joy, await.

Walter continues,

“On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you —
you Easter parade of newness.

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,
Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;
Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with
mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.”

Amen.

(Poem, *Marked by Ashes*, by Walter Brueggemann)