Ash Wednesday 2022

Joel 2.1-2,12-17
2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10
Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

It is obvious to most people that there is a contradiction between the gospel reading we have just heard, and the act—in a moment's time—of receiving ashes on our foreheads.

In the gospel reading, Jesus warns us against public displays of piety; but the wearing of ashes seems to be exactly such a display.

We'll return to this contradiction in a moment: first, some remarks about where this peculiar practice comes from, and what it is intended to mean:

The phrase "sackcloth and ashes" is a familiar one, and is found in multiple stories in the Bible, in which some character rends off their clothes, dons garments of sackcloth, and covers themselves in ashes, or sometimes in dirt. That is, they make themselves look dirty and feel uncomfortable. And this is done either as a sign of repentance of some sin, or of sorrow over a grave loss. Sackcloth and ashes: it is about guilt and grief, sin and death. One might make an apology in sackcloth and ashes; or attend a funeral in sackcloth and ashes.

Over time, this Semitic cultural practice turned into a Christian liturgical one. Perhaps by the eighth century, and certainly by the tenth century, a "day of ashes" has been observed at the beginning of Lent, when Christians would confess their sins—sometimes even publicly—and receive ashes, marked or strewn on their heads. Around the same time, both sackcloth and ashes also made appearances at deathbed and funerary rituals, especially among monks, who might be laid atop sackcloth and sprinkled with ashes as they were dying.

Time and respectability has a way of denuding rituals of their original intention and emotional intensity. We see this most clearly in our rite of baptism, which once upon a time—and still now in some churches—involves the triple plunging of the candidates into water, and their raising up again, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holt Ghost. The impression of being *drowned* was more evident then than it is now, with our meagre thrice trickling of water: not too much, less we get our Sunday Bests too wet.

But the same erosion has happened for Ash Wednesday too. You will not be standing up here to confess your sins aloud before the congregation. I will not be besmirching your lovely clothes with strewn ashes or dirt. You will leave only with a neat sign of the cross on your forehead, and—if you are quite absentminded—you might end up with some of it on your sleeve.

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Some weeks ago, I mentioned that the Christian emphasis on humility as a virtue runs the risk of encouraging false humility. So perverse are we that we can turn acts of self-abasement into means of self-promotion. It happens so easily.

It happens more easily, perhaps, in our simplified and sanitised version of the ritual: this charcoal cross is more easily turned into a badge of piety than, say, ashful hair and shoulders, or smudged faces, as if we have all been weeping with mascara on.

It happens so easily that this expression of sorrow at our concupiscence and mortality becomes a virtue signal, if not of piety than of self-awareness that great moral ideal of my own generation, which so often confuses "raising awareness" for real and impactful activism. Come think of it: many generations are guilty of the same.

It happens so easily that it might be better to dispense with this ritual altogether, so misunderstood as it is, perhaps irretrievably so. And yet, how fitting that this sign of human moral fragility is itself morally fragile: a small parable of oil and carbon, itself corruptible, bespeaking human corruptibility.

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I confess that I do not know if there is irreconcilable conflict between the instruction in our gospel reading and the practice of the imposition of ashes. I do, however, maintain that some liturgical reminder of our sinfulness and mortality is an important aspect of Christian discipline, and this is the one we have inherited. And I maintain that the practice is not intended to signal piety, but quite to the contrary, sinfulness: it is, if you like, our version of the scarlet letter.

Perhaps the thing to do is to retain it so long as we guard ourselves from understanding it amiss, and I have a suggestion for how to go about doing this:

When you come up later, I want you to think about something—some act, some incident, some personality trait—for which you are sorry; and let the mark of the cross be a sign of that specific thing. Let it remind you of your sins and weakness whenever you see it in the mirror. Let it remind you of their broader effects whenever you see it smudging on clothes and upholstery. And perhaps most importantly of all, let it remind you that your sins do not define you, as the mark fades and is washed away.