

Mark's Musings - The beginning of Lent, a Call to Discomfort

Wednesday 22nd marks the beginning of Lent, as we observe Ash Wednesday. For those of you who are able to make it, there will be a short service at 7.00 pm on Wednesday (before Church Council @ 7.30pm) to start our Lenten journey together. The main readings for Ash Wednesday are Joel 2:1-2; 12-17 Psalm 51:1-17 and Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21. My sermon for Ash Wednesday will be posted on our website - as with all my sermons for our Stewardship Renewal Program during Lent.

Ash Wednesday isn't the most popular day in the Church Calendar, nor are services the best attended. Some of that is because of it being mid-week, and life being busy for many. Some of it is because some parts of the Protestant church 'lost' the rich tradition associated with lent and Ash Wednesday, and have only begun to re-discover it in the past 10-15 years. And some of it is because we are rather uncomfortable with what Ash Wednesday stands for, and attending a worship service on the day can bring it a little too close.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we are mortal.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we make mistakes.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that in our lives there are things that we really could do without.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we get a little too 'sucked in' by the pace and the values of our society.

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that we are called to repentance in our lives.

None of these are populist themes - even within the church. Even the phrase that we use at the time of placing ashes on people's foreheads or hands ("Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return") can bring it home to people very clearly. Death is a part of life. Not so much biological death; but the death that we bring on ourselves because we forget that we were created in the image of God.

But as important as the prod into discomfort is at the beginning of Lent, we should also remember that it is *ultimately* only uncomfortable if we fail to place Ash Wednesday and Lent within the framework of our whole faith.

A reminder of our mortality stands also as a reminder of God's divinity.

A reminder of our mistakes stands as a reminder of God's perfection.

A reminder of the things we can do without in life stands as a reminder that what we ultimately need is God.

A reminder of the pace and values of our society stands as a reminder of the blessed shalom-peace of God.

A reminder of the call to repentance stands as a reminder of God's faithfulness and forgiving grace.

But more importantly, I would encourage you into an observance of Lent that creates space for you, that casts off things in life that are standing in the way of your relationship with God and your relationships with others.

I enclose at the foot of this message a poem by Rev Bill Loader that I will be using in my devotions this week. I hope you may discover some time to sit with the poem, and with the grace of God.

May God's peace fill you and surround you.
Grace and peace, Mark

+

A Prayer for Ash Wednesday

The darkness asks us questions.
You are out there and we do not see.
You invite us into the night,
the stillness, the loneliness, the desert place.

We cannot see our shadow;
the cold damp of unknowing rises up from beneath our feet.
We tread cautiously, tentatively.

We are afraid,
afraid of ghosts
haunting us with spectres of guilt
and shame.

We would like to run back,
reach the river bank,
swim the Jordan,
sit in the sun by the sea,
mending our nets.
But you have brought us here
- with no bread.

When we look we can see only ourselves,
our darkness.
When we read,
it is invisible words which cannot be grasped,
thoughts we cannot clutch,
hope we cannot capture.

Yet the wild honey remains a taste in our mouth,
a memory for a new day.

Why have you brought us here?
What miracle will you perform for us?

The darkness sighs around us,
dense with your unseen presence,
close to our breathing,
close to our breathing.

O darkness, enlighten us,
embrace us with your invisible love.
Let us see your glory in the ashes.
Take us by the hand that we may trust the darkness.
Minister to us by your Spirit that we may not be afraid.
Jesus, keep the beasts away.

Amen