

Ash Wednesday

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Ash Wednesday, Wednesday 1st March 2006.

At the beginning of Lent a bishop friend of mine brings out two cardboard cut out figures – Gus and Tom – and sets them on his desk in his study. Gus commends ‘Give up something’. Tom commends ‘Take on more’. Having Gus and Tom around as companions during Lent helps my friend, now like me in his mid fifties, to see that in the second half of life we approach God more by subtraction than by addition.

I love Lent, the sad springtime of the Christian year. When I was a parish priest in central London, I had parishioners who lived such a simple and focussed life all the year round on the housing estates of South Victoria that they saw little point in Lent. But for most of us, it is important to have an annual check-up and rebalancing.

Over stimulation with ideas, as well as with food and drink, can sap our spiritual energies. For modern people, reducing the dose of morning news programmes and TV might be just as relevant as more traditional fasting. Our lives can become stale, unless they are refreshed by the inexhaustible vitality that flows from the Word of God. The submerging of the rhythms of the day, the week and the year which connect us to other parts of the creation, to the sun and the moon and the seasons, by a hectic life of getting and spending, leaves us dangerously exposed to spiritual exhaustion.

Paradoxically, as each moment is hyped in a life which lacks light and shade, feast and fast, as part of a coherent pattern embracing the whole year, then everything is reduced to a dull average. In this state we are vulnerable to the dejection which swept over Hamlet when he exclaimed, ‘How stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the usages of this world.’

Ash Wednesday invites us to resist the pressure of the passing moment, to acknowledge those parts of our lives that have become stale, and to open ourselves to the gift which Christ longs to impart: newness of life, the gift of Easter or resurrection life. The gospel helps us to see how we should go about our work. The account of the woman caught in adultery in John does not appear in the very earliest manuscripts, and in the Greek versions of the New Testament it was not finally accepted in the standard text until about 900AD.

The story seems, however, to be ancient and consistent with the teaching of Jesus; but perhaps the early Church was disconcerted by the ease with which Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery at a time when the Church’s own penitential discipline was very stern. Jesus comes into the Temple very early in the morning. The people come to him and then the religious professionals, the party of the pious enter; we can imagine, with a great surge of indignation. A woman had been caught in adultery: it is important to remember that in the religious law of the time, adultery was unfaithfulness on the part of a married woman. The law was not concerned with affairs between husbands and unmarried women.

The woman had been taken ‘in the very act’. She should be stoned: Moses says so in the law. What do *you* say? It is a trap, of course, to show Jesus up as someone with no respect for the law of Moses. You can feel the indignation, the cunning, the fury. Standards slipping everywhere and this so-called teacher undermining the traditions of the faith. What does Jesus do? He stoops and, with his finger, writes upon the ground.

It is easy to get on the treadmill of over-consumption, overwork, gusts of anger and diminishing awareness. There are warning signs in our irritation within, evidence that there are unacknowledged shadows we are covering up. We relieve the pressure by projecting these shadows on to other people. We do not know what we are doing, but if you have ever felt a surge of dislike for someone you have only just met, hang on to that feeling, for you have been given a precious indication of what you are covering up inside yourself. We all dislike most in others what we are prone to ourselves.

Jesus detaches himself from the confrontation. He stoops rather than bristle and enter into argument. He doodles with his finger upon the earth. The message here is not that we should opt out of confrontations, which may be sometimes necessary, but if we want to see clearly and engage profoundly there are times when we must stoop down. You disengage to clarify and connect at depth.

What does this mean for us? Awareness is diminished by over-stimulation. Our Lenten fasting should not be some token abstinence from alcohol or chocolate but a conscious effort to reduce stimulation, to stoop to clarify and connect.

Jesus' life was marked by a rhythm of walking and talking with the crowds and retreating to a desert place. In Lent we stoop down and detach in order to clarify and connect more profoundly. That is why any fasting from over-stimulation must be accompanied by a renewed commitment to meditation, the way in which we clarify the world within and reduce the noise so that we can hear the voice of conscience. God longs for us to enjoy the new life which bursts from the tomb; but our lives become old, a crust forms over the well-spring at the heart of life where the Holy Spirit flows with inexhaustible vitality.

The palm crosses from last year have been burnt. Here is the ash and soon we shall receive the ash on our foreheads as a sign that the natural life disconnected from the life of the Holy Trinity is bound to a cycle of decay and death, from dust to dust. Openness to the gift of Christ comes when we confront our creatureliness and see clearly that we are not immortal gods but mortal humans. Jesus draws clarity and insight from the earth to which he stoops.

Those who think that the woman has got away with it too easily have not understood the spiritual reality of the story. The woman has not been condemned by others but is confronted with her own promise-breaking and unfaithfulness. To confront the truth about oneself can be agony. That is often the hardest thing to do. Jesus' words cut like a surgeon's scalpel. There is no condemnation. There is release from self-loathing, but there is no fudging – walk on and change. First the release, then the transformation.

Give yourself time to be present in this scene. Be one of the original crowd, enter with the scribes, stand by the woman. This is a time for seeing clearly our evasions, our frailty, our mortality, our meanness of spirit. Detach in order to confront these realities. Hear Jesus say even to you and me, 'I do not condemn you, but walk on and accept the transformation which comes to those who turn in my direction and are filled with my Spirit.'