

Bristol Ash Wednesday Sermon: 14.2.18

+ Yesterday we tossed pancakes, symbolically using up rich ingredients in the pancake batter as we prepared to embark on the fasting we associate with Lent. An odd choice of words then for George Herbert, the seventeenth century priest and poet, who wrote: *Welcome, deare feast of Lent.* Hardly a feast you might think, without biscuits, or alcohol, or coffee, or over indulgence - even the Points West presenter yesterday was weighing up whether or not she could eat her Valentine's Day chocolates. (You should be so lucky, I thought!)

This *deare feast of Lent* Herbert refers to starts today, Ash Wednesday, the day in the year when Christians are exhorted to repent of our sins. Repentance is a recurring Lenten theme and to the casual observer it may seem that Christians are unhealthily obsessed with our sinfulness, and the attendant guilt.

Christian or not, I suspect many adults live with fairly constant, nagging feelings of guilt about the things we have done which we ought not to have done, and perhaps more commonly nowadays the things we ought to have done and have not done. Thankfully most of us don't commit serious sins such as murder and theft. Less obvious but nonetheless guilt-inducing are the easily-glossed-over sins of omission: my failure to give generously, my tendency to avoid loving others who are different, or difficult, or embarrassing. Succumbing to the temptations of greed. Inappropriate images on the computer. Drinking too much. And I'm sure we can all think of other examples of human failing to add to that sad litany.

I had an interesting discussion with someone recently who wasn't prepared to even consider whether he had ever committed any sins, because he refused to be made to feel guilty. He wouldn't accept that if we think we are without sin we deceive ourselves. Sin is real. Sin has been part of our human condition since God created us, because we alone of all his creatures are aware of the implications of our actions. My cat attacks the local stray, who comes into our garden in

search of breakfast. This is his instinct, he could never be taught to treat his furry neighbour as himself, and then feel guilty if he didn't.

So on Ash Wednesday and week by week at the Eucharist, we Christians repent of our sins, we try to do better and we crave affirmation: did I do as I was supposed to, we check anxiously? Needing to be told, yes, yes, you did really well. Did I do a better job than him or her? Hoping for praise. Wasn't I kind to that irritating so and so? Yes you were, your halo must be shining brightly! There's nothing wrong with giving or receiving praise and affirmation from one another, providing it's given honestly, but we should never expect to receive it from God. To the God who loves us unconditionally we must surrender unconditionally.

There's a story about a woman who had a strange dream:

The woman described the dream she had just woken up from. She'd died and gone to heaven, dragging two bulging suitcases labelled, "Good Deeds". She rang the bell of God's door. No answer. While waiting, she checked her precious baggage, her passport to heaven. The suitcases seemed to have grown smaller. Anxiously she pressed the bell again. Still no answer. Once more she checked the cases. They'd disappeared completely. Utterly distraught, she fled in confusion from the one place she'd spent her entire life trying to reach.'

Now I'm no Jungian analyst, but even to the psychologically illiterate it seems to me that the interpretation of that dream points to this evening's Gospel – 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal'. In other words, as we'll shortly be reminded, there's no point in trying to store up my treasures on earth, because neither my possessions nor my good deeds can be put into a suitcase and taken with me when I die. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

This is a hard lesson, we want God to see how well we're doing – even if we heed the advice not to practice our piety in public, we want him to at least privately acknowledge our efforts. But God loves us unconditionally, and he can't be bought. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard, some of whom toiled all day and some for five minutes at the end of the afternoon. They were all paid the same, because as they learnt, you can't buy God's love. Or what about the Prodigal Son – the one left behind feels slighted when his brother returns from his spree of dissolute living and is welcomed home with great celebrations, but when he complains the Father explains that he loves them both equally and is just overjoyed to have his lost son returned to him.

Always more ready to love us than we are to love him, and needing nothing in return, God our Father sent his only Son to live among us, to experience our human condition – though he himself was without sin. And by dying for us, Christ – fully human and fully divine – became the bridge linking us, here on earth, eternally with God our Father in heaven. But lest we forget, this hasn't always been the case; before that first Good Friday mankind was separated from God by sin, there was an unbridgeable gulf between God and man. This is not a good state to be in, because we human beings need proximity to God in order to flourish. Christ died, that we might live.

By living, we don't of course mean the mechanics of breathing, eating, sleeping. This kind of Christian living means being the person we were truly created to be. Flourishing. Becoming more Christ-like. And sin is what so often prevents us from living like this, it holds us back.

Some years ago I remember being with pilgrims at the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, watching a very elderly man slowly and painfully making his way to the place where confessions are heard. No one will ever know what it was that the old man confessed, but when he came out his whole demeanour had changed. He held his head up and walked tall. He said he felt as though he'd gained ten years. He felt relieved of a burden he'd carried for decades and his only regret

was that he hadn't jettisoned it long ago. Finally, better late than never, he had received God's forgiveness and been set free to live his life as the person he was created to be.

In a few moments we'll participate in the solemn penitential rite for today, Ash Wednesday. As we prepare for that, we'll hear the hauntingly beautiful *Kyrie Eleison* from Allegri's *Missa che fa oggi il mio sole*. We may choose to use these four minutes to reflect on those sins which separate us from God, giving thanks that we don't need to impress God with suitcases bulging with good deeds; God is always ready to forgive those who turn to him in penitence and faith. Lent is to be welcomed as a *deare feast*, because at its best it offers us amendment of life, setting us free to live as children of God, created in his own image and loved unconditionally. Amen.

