

Ash Wednesday / 5 March 2014 ✠ St John the Evangelist, Oxford
Joel 2.1-2, 12-17 / Psalm 51 / II Corinthians 5.20b-6.10 / Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

Beware of practicing your piety before others
in order to be seen by them.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen.

“Do not interpretations belong to God?”

Joseph and his brothers in Genesis do not appear in our readings for Ash Wednesday. Why should they? The lectionary-framers want us to think about repentance and forgiveness, about our bondage to sin and our redemption into abundant life. But Joseph’s simple insight into practical hermeneutics illuminates our ritual this evening, illuminates indeed the truth that brings us here, to our knees, to be reminded that dust we are, and to dust we shall return.

I hear the voice of Joseph as I wince — *annually*, painfully — when our brothers and sisters in the church take up the opportunity today to ridicule ourselves for observing Ash Wednesday as we do. “Isn’t it ironic,” people will say, “that we read the gospel about not disfiguring our faces when we fast at the one rite of the year when we ritually disfigure our faces?” Wo-ho! As if they were the first people *ever* to imagine some incongruity between observing Ash Wednesday and reading Jesus’ admonition that when we fast, we ought not disfigure

our faces so as to show others that we are fasting, as if their jocose trivialisation of sacramental piety credentialed them as truth-tellers (over against we hypocrites and dupes), and as if people outside the church really care much what our lectionary says today, or what our foreheads look like.

I wince at the fatuity of the jape, and that such jokey nonsense often comes from people who themselves as *the sophisticated ones*. I wince, and I resist the temptation to explain at great length *what* the ritual of Ash Wednesday means, *why* we practice it, *how* in fact one risks making oneself even more spiritually self-important by mocking catholic ritual than we do by submitting to it.

These temptations, though, trigger the importance of hearing Joseph out. My urgent desire to *force* on my neighbours the catholic understanding of the meaning of the imposition of ashes betrays the subtle seduction to think that *I* ought to be in control of interpretation, and that *I* be deputised to tell everybody what's what. Were I to succumb to that temptation though, even at my most eloquent and persuasive I would convince hardly anyone of the soundness of what we teach and practice. Contrariwise, most listeners would perceive me to be defensive. They'd imagine — with, it must be said, a certain degree of accuracy — they'd imagine me to be rationalising the apparent plain contradiction between what Jesus said and what we do. *My* explanation of the imposition of ashes against *theirs*: how would someone know whose account should prevail? Do not (after all) the interpretations of our words and deeds and intentions belong not to me or you or to the cultured despisers, but to God?

We cannot *make* the spiritual soundness of our liturgy evident by dint of laboured explanation, by the perfection with which we may execute sacred ritual, by the beatific harmonies accompanying it or the

profound hallowed words that articulate it. We cannot *make* ourselves right in the eyes of a sceptical observer. Sure though we may be that the world interprets us unfairly, we cannot *establish* our own righteousness through our own efforts. At best, we inevitably mix in a dollop of injured pride, or thinking better of ourselves than we ought, of partisan self-affirmation. We have neither the strength *within* ourselves nor the perspective *outside* ourselves to justify ourselves. Misinterpretation, folly, wickedness, evil, these lie beyond our capacity to defeat, even our capacity to *deflect* most of the time — however hard to it may be for us to acknowledge. The eyes of the world assert that the correct interpretation of Ash Wednesday amounts only to smudgy spiritual self-aggrandisement even as the correct interpretation of Ash Wednesday in the understanding of the catholic faith is precisely the opposite. And tonight we confess that vanity and self-justification may afflict the reasoning of a faithful catholic as much as they do a doubt-filled sceptic.

We cannot by our own strength, by our own will, by our own power of control parse out our longings from the truth we proclaim. Our very inclination to read our desires onto divine revelation besets us; so the Spirit gives us, in glimpses, the opportunity to see a faint reflection of our own frailty. To the extent that we recognise in those murky outlines the honest image of our weakness, to that extent we admit the *Spirit's* power into our lives. To the extent that we *relinquish* an obdurate will to rule the world, *release* the desire to control the world's interpretations, and *let go* the determination to adjudicate with ultimate authority how everything ought to be — to the extent that we can bear a cross of ash not only on our brow today, not only visibly and materially, but *every* day in our heart and on our souls — to just that extent we make room to cooperate with the Spirit in cultivating a

church where truth flourishes, and a world where peace and equity abound. We cannot foist on others a scheme for improving *them* according to our own lights, not in the Name of God. All we *have*, all we *control*, all we can *impose* on others is nought but dust.

Dust re-presents to us the elements from which God knits us together. That arid stuff, drily saturated with sin, steeped in parching desire, draws us ever away to a destiny of dissolution, emptiness, vacuity. Having given us a little taste of nothingness, sin makes us want more. And the more we desire, the more we permit ash to direct our hearts and our actions, the further we drive into the wilderness of sin, the more firmly we enslave ourselves to a destiny, a *dustiny*, of dry barren death. That for which we thirst in the desert is more dust. That dusty deadly desire for power at work in our members, the desire for wealth, for control over others will ever steer us *away* from God's free-flowing living waters. Power, privilege, status, abundance, these distract us from the open secret, plain as the cross on our faces, that repentance and humility draw us closer to the Saviour who revealed in his life and death the path out of the desert, to Jerusalem, to the heavenly sanctuary where we will find rest and consolation.

Whatever the world may think — we can't control the world, we won't force our way — ash, tonight, is *to us* the sign of weakness, mortality, and sin; but in the church's act of crossing our brows with ash, the sin-sign marks us as dusty disciples in solidarity with Christ on our way out of the desert. We, marked with the sign of self-emptying truth, may by grace follow the cross in the way of repentance, of renunciation, of humility. "In the dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying" all we have is dust and ash — but what *precious* dust, that connects our self-denial to Christ's sacrifice! What luminous ash, that illumines our way from the gloomy self-generated fog of our own

pretensions, into the clear light of grateful dependence on grace for even the smallest measure of what we can accomplish. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing; united with Christ in renunciation and repentance, he can do all things through us.

So this evening we come forward to receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads, the mark of the cross not in anointing oil as at our chrismation, but in dusty ash this time — and in that very gesture we submit ourselves to the ambiguity of this sign. As we kneel, we *cede* the prerogative to *determine* our own status before God. As we receive the reminder, in coarse sandy cinders or smooth powdery ash, knowing that some will think us hypocritical, foolish. We confess that dust we are, and we and all our pride, all our accomplishments, whatever our claim to have overcome history's amnesia, all these will return to dust. Even our faith that God, through Jesus, will not forget us but bring us to the fullness of life — even that faith depends not on *our* attaining some degree of mastery of ourselves or our destiny, but solely and utterly on the forgiving grace by which God reaches out to us, strengthens and empowers us, loves us and *will not let us go*.

We are not the agents of our *own* salvation; we are not the heroes of our *own* stories. We are ashes — but ashes that God interprets as the very stuff of which saints are made.

AMEN