

## **Ash Wednesday: Let Death be our Teacher**

The Ash Wednesday service is a very simple and ancient one. It is both sober and sensual as we smell the smoke, receive the gritty smudge of ash, and experience the evening fall around us.

The readings do not differ from one year to the next. Always this reading from Joel, this reading from Matthew, this psalm. Year after year we are brought back to this place, this moment. This place between blessing and the curse of mortal flesh. This time of urgency and eternity. This sense of dread and hope.

It is said that when Ghandi was assassinated, shot whilst walking in a crowd, that he uttered the personal name of God as he fell to the ground. In his tradition that was Ram. Whilst we might cry out in fear "Oh my God!" would you or I in that unexpected moment remember our personal name for God.

Ghandi wasn't just having a good day he had practiced all his life to be aware of God in each and every moment no matter what the circumstance. Lent is a season in which we can draw near to our own mortality and the death of Christ so that we might live more fully.

The call of the season is in essence simple and yet we tend to find it nigh impossible. We are to repent, to be repentant. We are to act with love toward others, we are to be loving. We are to pray much, we are to be in prayer. These are not requirements in competition with each other – they are all the same call to be deeply available to God and neighbour. To repent of our wrong actions and our wrong attachments. To give out of love to those in need until our barns are emptied of distracting treasure. To pray so much that only the simplest prayer is left in our hearts in an empty room. To empty ourselves of all that distracts us from God and is an obstacle to others knowing God.

And we need to be stripped bare in order to accompany Christ through his passionate journey of life and death to life. We need to practice dying so that we might live more fully. And so we remember that we are but dust and that to dust we shall return.

Befriending death is part of many ancient spiritual wisdoms. Some traditions speak of becoming aware of death travelling at one's left shoulder and to respect the wisdom that comes from the constant company of death. In our Christian tradition our central story is that of Christ's journey from life into death that we might all have life abundant and eternal. He won life for us and yet we cannot avoid getting our hands dirty. We too must embrace death for as St Paul reminds us we become one with Christ in his death and resurrection.

Quite rightly we as modern people do not tend to fast or pray or give alms in the same extreme fashion that our spiritual forbears did. And extreme abstinence will not necessarily bring us any closer to God than extreme indulgence. But we may have tamed the season too much so that we excuse ourselves from the work of dying into life. This Lent let us quietly and courageously participate in Christ's journey so that what is no longer needed may die and what is eternal and God given may rise to new life.

Let us face our literal physical deaths: each of us, no matter our age, are closer to death today than yesterday. Let us acknowledge what aches, what doesn't work so well, what our fears are, so that come Good Friday we are ready to die with Christ. And let us face the thousand small deaths of life: relationship hurts, disappointments in others and ourselves, worries and anxieties for ourselves and others, even the bittersweet pain of joy that we know will fade and become dust.

Let pain be pain, let death be death, and let it be our guide and teacher, as we companion our Lord who died as one of us, for us.

Let even death bring life!