

St John's East Malvern and St Agnes' Glen Huntly. Ash Wednesday 17th February 2021

Isaiah 58:1-12 Psalm 51:1-17 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10 Matthew 6:1-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

“Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them” – well... fat chance of that this year! It seems almost appropriate to be confined to our homes this Ash Wednesday – it certainly accords with what Jesus is teaching his disciples in the Ash Wednesday Gospel reading, “whenever you go to pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...” This year, at least, there's not much else of an option.

There has been much clergy chatter, since it became apparent that this latest lockdown would extend through to Ash Wednesday, about how we might cope with this in our congregations – with the emphasis hung up largely on the question, “how will we do the ashing?” Ash Thursday or Friday, perhaps? The settled wisdom seems to be to incorporate a rite of ashing into Sunday's service, the First Sunday in Lent. That assumes, of course, we will be able to meet again this coming Sunday.

All this troubles me a little – partly because it seems to bind us up, unhelpfully in these times, with the ritual actions. Now – I say this cautiously, as a card-carrying ‘ritualist’. And in the Catholic tradition of Anglicanism we believe rituals are not empty things, but connect

us tangibly with the means of God's grace in our lives as well as the good purpose that God is working out in us and in all Creation. As the Creation is for ever held and sustained in connection with the Creator, so too rituals and liturgy anchor us in that creative purpose and, ultimately, recreate us into the image of God's good imagination.

But here is the danger, if we disconnect the ritual from the reality – the sign from the thing signified then we become so caught up with the outward ritual that its connection with the real drifts away. The emphasis becomes 'keeping up appearances' rather than inhabiting reality. It's this disconnect, this being wrapped up in the outward signs, that Jesus warns against in the Gospel – sounding trumpets before us, praying long loud prayers on street corners, heaping up empty phrases. Of course, 'keeping up appearances' does seem to be what Jesus suggests to us while fasting – washing and making up our faces to present a bright and cheery visage to hide the discipline and discomfort of fasting. But this is not a disconnect between ritual and reality – but rather an inversion of the ritual in order to prevent exactly this kind of disconnection... the affected contortion and disfiguring of the face in order to pose our piety before others... when repentance turns into self-righteousness.

What follows too from this disconnection is that we miss out on the reality – our sphere of existence is transferred into the 'virtual' – a not-quite reality.

This is also – without labouring the point too much – the hesitation I have with online worship, it disconnects the outward form from the inner reality in an attempt to ‘carry on’ as normal and ‘keep up appearances’. Part of the reality we miss out on is temporal and spatial – time and space – liturgical time... today is still Ash Wednesday no matter how we may or may not be able to observe it ritually – and sacred space... our churches, yes, but while they must remain closed how are we to consecrate with our prayers physical space, and not a virtual Zoom room?

How then, this Ash Wednesday, can we lay hold – through ritual – to the reality of this day? First – it is a day for repentance and to consider our mortality. To cover ourselves in the ashes of repentance and to remember that we too shall return to those same ashes. The context of the Pandemic in Australia as it has panned out has perhaps obscured that reality – perhaps we feel a certain invincibility in our heroic effort to all but eradicate it from these shores – in other parts of the world though, at this time, this same Pandemic has made the reality of mortality and the fragility of life far more pertinent. Spend some time this day in repentance and remember that you are dust – and to dust you shall return.

The other ritual act we would normally make is the signing of the cross on the forehead – an outward and visible mark of where it is we put our hope. A mark and promise God makes on us – as his treasure – as a symbol that even in ashes, the sign of the Cross endures

as our hope and salvation. An outward sign – because it is not in us – but in what God has done for us, the mark of which we gladly bear.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” – our treasure as Christians is in the Cross as we strive to follow faithfully as Jesus’ disciples in its shadow, and as we turn away from everything that obscures its Glory, not least everything that tempts us to seek satisfaction within ourselves: turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

A suggestion for a little ritual to point to this reality in the context of our isolation – find a dusty corner of your house, a sooty spot in the fireplace, a grotty window on the car, a dirty patch in the garden – and make there, in the midst of that fragile and forgotten place, a simple sign of the cross with your thumb... and leave it there, let it bear its own witness.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return: turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ.

AMEN.