

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2: 12-18 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6:2 Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

While these reflections usually focus on the Sunday readings, I also realize that many of us will be preaching today because of the special Ash Wednesday services (myself included!). So, I thought I would share a few reflections on the day. Some of these thoughts may also help us reflect on the entire season of Lent and so may provide background for other preachings during the Lenten season we are entering.

Ash Wednesday. The very title has an ominous ring to it. Add to that the somber reminder as ashes are imposed on our foreheads, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” The alternative formula, “Turn away from your sin and be faithful to the gospel” sounds much better. I want to “be faithful to the gospel”. But I am too quick to skip that opening, “Turn away from your sin.” Sounds like, “Repent!” to me. There it is again, that serious note. No matter how you put it, I am dust and I must repent. No getting around the serious shift in sights and sounds the liturgy just took. Ash Wednesday is preceded by Fat Tuesday’s excesses because we all know how grim Lent can be. Let’s enjoy ourselves one last time before we enter the long dark tunnel of Lenten denial. So goes the popular notion of Lent. But suppose it isn’t such a glum note? Suppose there is something joyous and relieving about Lent? Suppose in other words, it is a time to clear away the distractions and hear again the liberating message of the Gospel? And suppose it is also a time to renew our community’s commitment to spread that message to others by our words and deeds? Still more, suppose it is a call to live as the reconciled community we claim to be, wouldn’t that be a powerful message and an invitation to others to be part of us?

We really don’t need Ash Wednesday to remind us that we are dust. Reminders of dust are all around us. Dust is what we return to at the end of our lives. But long before we breathe our last, life reminds us of the corruptibility of everything. So much of what we put our confidence in ages, breaks, comes apart at the seams and wears out. All that is new, shiny and glitzy have a very short life expectancy. Mortality touches even our most noble human treasures; loved ones die, sickness limits us, age saps our energies and our noble efforts to do good feel the strain of the long haul. This day’s liturgical action puts ashes on our foreheads, dust before our eyes, but the ashes are just a reminder of what life does to us all too frequently.

It comes over to us and, in one way or another, rubs ashes on our foreheads, and says, “Remember, you are dust.” It is frightening to think about how much we forget and run away from this reality. So much of our society bases our identity and worth on what we have achieved and what we own. Today says, “Remember, it is dust.”

But after we are told to repent we are invited again to “be faithful to the gospel.” We are invited today to remember that we are baptized Christians, called to be in the world in a unique way. The world we live in is guided by different standards and norms for behavior. These ashes also remind us that our old way of life is dead-- turned to dust. We don’t belong to the old world any longer, so we need to stop living as if we do. We are reborn to a new life. And our lives in Christian community must reflect this new life and help others to hear the message we hear today, “Remember all else is dust” In Paul’s language, our lives are an invitation to others to, “...be reconciled to God,” for we too are “ambassadors for Christ.”

Walter Brueggeman, referring to the dust statement in Gen 2: 7 (“The Lord God formed the human person of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living creature.”), says that the Ash Wednesday liturgical formula reminds us that the human person is fundamentally material in origin, subject to all the realities of an “earth creature”. And since dust is no “self-starter,” the reality of the human situation is that we depend on God’s free gift of breath. We are humans totally dependent on God for each moment of our existence. This is not a curse, but what it means to be human. So, when we are told to remember we are dust today, we are also making a statement about ourselves to God. It is as if we are saying, “Remember our origins O God. We are dust without you. So much of what we touch turns to dust if not done in your name. Sustain us moment to moment in your life and through the death of your Son, deliver us from our sin.” Who are we humans? We are creatures gifted from moment to moment by our gracious God and that is not a bad thing to remember as we enter another Lent.

It is important during Lent not to privatize the season. Over the generations, with the separation of adult baptism from the Vigil, we lost a sense of the communal sense of Lent. What we got instead was a highly individualized experience focusing on private spirituality with personal penances and “spiritual development.” As always, the scriptural readings give us balance and keep us on track. While we won’t be focusing on Joel, notice, in passing, the call for the

assembly to gather, “notify the congregation, assemble the elders....” The community is being gathered and reminded to turn back to God, “...rend your hearts not your garments and return to the Lord your God.”

The selection from 2 Corinthians puts our Lenten focus on the community’s renewal in mission. Paul’s letter reveals that the Corinthian community showed the same flaws as our own church communities. (The first thing we said in today’s eucharistic gathering was “Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.”) We do tend to idealize the early church community, don’t we? It’s as if they were the perfect model of what it means to be a Christian community, and we are always falling short of their mark. But they were, and we are, always in need of reconciliation. In fact, Paul speaks very boldly appealing on God’s behalf for this reconciliation. Jesus is the sign that God wants to be reconciled to us. There is an urgency to this appeal for reconciliation. “Now is the acceptable time.” Things must have been pretty hot among the Corinthian Christians! We may be resistant to God and to changing our ways (“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”), but God is once again taking the initiative to appeal to us to return.

Throughout the first 7 chapters of this letter Paul is focusing on the gospel message of reconciliation and on the nature of Christian ministry. This community was split into bickering factions. Paul can be quite harsh in his criticism of them. Christ’ death has reconciled us to God and so, not to live as a reconciled community is to deny that gospel and to fail to be, with Paul, an “ambassador for Christ” to the world. Lent calls us back to God and to each other in community. The message we are to proclaim is a message to be preached by the witness of the whole community as we live out our joyful awareness of what God has done for us.

QUOTABLE:

Ronald Stanley, O.P. sent this. I think it speaks to the communal nature of sin and the call for the community to repent.

In the railroad station in Calcutta there is a large sign--in Hindi, Bengali, and English--which reads:

SEVEN SOCIAL SINS
POLITICS WITHOUT PRINCIPLES
WEALTH WITHOUT WORK

COMMERCE WITHOUT MORALITY
EDUCATION WITHOUT CHARACTER
PLEASURE WITHOUT

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP
FrJude@JudeOP.org