

Ash Wednesday

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

That statement can be harsh or poetic, **depending** on how you see yourself within the world.

In the Gospel passage from Matthew this evening that we hear Jesus' instructions to 'go into your room shut the door and pray' to 'not look dismal as the hypocrites do' as you fast, and when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others.

And yet here we are, praying in public, and part of a liturgy where we put ash on our heads so that it may be seen, but I will leave you to decide for yourself whether you look dismal or not.

Now, it is largely understood that Judaism in the time of Jesus, was made up of four sects, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots. Jesus, is speaking to an audience, who were divided with how to live out their faith in oppression. The Zealots wanted to fight against the empire, the Sadducees wanted to cooperate with the empire, the Pharisees wanted to rigidly keep their religious identity by practicing their faith and the Essenes wanted to practice their faith by completely withdrawing from society into the desert. And with the benefit of hindsight we can add the Jesus Movement as a fifth Jewish movement of the time. Plenty of academics have tried and failed to decide whether Jesus as the Crucified Christ was a Pharisee wanting to rigidly keep his religious identity, a Zealot turning the tables in the temple, a Sadducee giving to Caesar what is Caesars or perhaps an Essene spending time away from his disciples in the desert. Any exercise of retrospectively deciding how Jesus practiced his Jewish faith is bound to fail, and yet it is a fascinating exercise. It's a bit like going into an interview room and being asked to pick one of a multitude of chairs to sit in, a very simple exercise of

sitting down, turns into a paranoid moment of which chair fits me best, what will they think if I sit on the sofa – will they think I am too relaxed? What if I sit in the massive arm chair – will they think I have a high degree of self-importance? A radical thought comes to mind that you could sit on the floor but then you would be accused of being a radical millennial.

Much like as we choose our chair in the interview, so often when we talk about Jesus and ‘what he said’ we say much more about ourselves than we say anything at all about Jesus or Christianity. In any one moment the church can embrace the Lion of Jesus found in Mark, the teacher of Israel in Matthew, the liberator of Luke or the Mystic of John. The task of each generation and particularly each preacher is to lay aside the bias we all hold and attempt to catch that gem of what we most need to hear from the spirit that day. The task is always doomed to fail, but acknowledging this, is the first step as we create a church that listens and understands.

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That statement is either harsh or poetic, depending on how you see **yourself** within the world. Well how do we see ourselves in the world. What is the status of dust in this day and age?

Hallowed matter, or the matter that is to be eradicated. As opposed to the tradition of giving things up for lent, many people take things on, and I think that task is much more profound and ten times harder. In the same way that we can tell a lot about ourselves from how we choose to view Jesus and Christianity, what says more about ourselves is what we choose to embrace during lent rather, than what we choose to cast off. Anyone can give up chocolate for lent and it's not worth patting ourselves on the back for abstaining from it for a few weeks – what is worth celebrating is how we might come out of lent enriched rather than deprived. Jesus says in our gospel this evening 'Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting... but when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.' If a Lenten fast is about anything it is a journey of self-discovery, not abandonment.

As we go out Chris will read another gospel verse and this time from Luke's Gospel where Jesus leaves 99 sheep to go out in search for the one lost sheep. Where is that one lost sheep in our lives, are we searching within ourselves or are we reaching out to someone else, this lent that is up to you. What are you choosing to embrace, rather than cast away?

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I hold a ministry of dust, a ministry of loving dust because we are dust. One of the creation narratives in Genesis reminds us that “God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”

God creates man/ out of dust from the ground.

V – I – eet - zayer adoni Elohim et ha-adam,/ afar min ha-adama

God formed man from the dust of the ground. In Hebrew you will notice that ha-adam and ha-adama are strikingly similar, ha-adam is ‘Adam’ and ha-adama is ‘from the ground’. We are people of the earth – earth people we are at one with the world. It is also worth noting that while the church through the ages considers the gender of theology through Adam and Eve, it forgot that the ha-adama is in fact feminine, the theological potential of that is amazing – although that is another sermon all together.

This evening we take on a part of the ha-adama as we go out into the world. We don't cast the world aside or start off a season of abandonment, but we take on the world - literally, and we continue to reconcile our place within it. This lent we can allow ourselves to be picked up, to cherish ourselves in a way that breaths life giving breath into our lives, in the knowledge that we are dust, we are earth people, who need just as much watering, just as much sun, just as much care as our creation does. If we truly care for ourselves, we will care for others and our world all the better. Lent at it's core is an experience of acknowledging our bias and projections, what are we projecting onto scripture because that is what we feel we want to hear, what we are projecting onto those foreboding chair in the interview room, what are we projecting onto the world, and asks the question what do we need to change within ourselves so that we might enrich our own lives and in turn others seeing the damage our bias and projection can cause?

As you take on the ash, a piece of the ha-adama, remember you are earth people, and the earth is glorious + needs care.