

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Wednesday 18th February 2015 7.00pm

Isaiah 58.1-12

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

Benjamin Franklin is said to have said, that *"in this world nothing can be certain, except death and taxes."* Taxes, as we've seen over the past week or so, may well be certain, but the richer you are, the easier it is to get away, with not paying them. Death comes to us all. The only certain thing about life is that we all die, whether we're rich or poor, from North or South, and even if we've never earned enough to pay taxes. Of course, how we die and what age we'll be when we die, is affected by our wealth and status. But it doesn't change the basic fact. All die. Yet it's a fact that many 21st century people prefer to deny, or avoid, maybe because we connect it with failure, about it. But death, loss and failure are part of life, and not just ours, for we share our mortality, and the inevitability of death and loss, with all creation. We're all part of life's cycle of death and renewal. We're all made of recycled particles of life that we share with all that has gone before us. And so *"remember you are dust and to dust you return"* is true of all that there is.

These past days, I've been wondering about the solidarity we share with all creation, give that death, loss and failure are part of the universe God created. I suspect that in earlier centuries, Ash Wednesday and Lent a different feel, from today. Whereas in our culture and time, death has been reduced to a largely medical experience, in other communities the fragility of life and the ever-present reality of death allowed Ash Wednesday and Lent to be an annual gift that enabled people to reflect on their mortality, and to reorder their lives and desires. Sara Miles, an Episcopalian pastor from San Francisco says it's, *"the most honest of days"* because it reminds us that our days are limited and that death, loss and failure, are a normal part of life. In the last few years churches in the US have started to take Ash Wednesday services onto the streets and public places through a programme called *"Ashes to Go"*. Passers-by are invited to receive ashes using the traditional words *"Remember you are dust and to dust you return"*. A few churches in Britain have followed and there's now an interesting debate about whether or not it's appropriate. Some see it as a means of evangelism. Others say ordinary passers-by will not understand. And giving ashes without also offering the opportunity to repent is cheap grace. Sara Miles writes about the experience in her most recent book. She tells two stories that I want to share before I go further.

In McDonalds, Miles writes, a *"small, serious Mayan woman, sitting alone at a greasy table, unwrapped her tiny baby from an acrylic blanket, and held him up to me. 'He's one and one half week's old.' She said proudly. I crossed his forehead with ashes, took a deep breath, and told the baby he was doing to die. And the mother, like everyone else we'd met that afternoon, said thank you. Why would you say thank you when a stranger tells you that you're going to die?"* she asks. She replies, *"Because the truth is a blessing."* One of the church members, sharing in distributing ashes that day, was Vera. Vera's sister had died a few years earlier on Ash Wednesday. For years, she was hated the day, but with time had come to see life and death differently. She says, *"Ash Wednesday is the most honest of days. It's a mystery, a sitting-with the dark. It is bearing witness to the dark."*

I'm drawn into these stories, because they encourage us to reflect on how people might connect with the themes of this service: mortality and repentance. People's willingness to receive ashes, leads me to believe that our mortality, our humanity should be the starting point for all our relationships. I know the traditional view is that repentance comes first and the rest follows. But I think that until we've embraced our mortality, until we can be honest about it, we won't be able to accept the darkness of what it means to be human, whether the darkness is the result of things we need to turn away from, or the failure, the loss, the death that is part of the very essence of life. Yet if this sounds like a counsel of despair it is not. For God's creating, and God's response to our human being, is rooted in the cycle of renewal. We are part of the dying and the living, the death and resurrection of the same dust or energy, that God created in the beginning and saw was good.

Lent gives us an annual opportunity to re-learn this. Beginning from today, we will journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, as he lives through failure, loss and death, and is raised from the dead on Easter Day. As we share his journey, and acknowledge our share Jesus' mortality, we're invited to reorder our desires. In today's Gospel reading he says, *"Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them... do not sound a trumpet before you... do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing... do not look dismal..."* Jesus invited us to adopt a silence of body, voice and mind.

He begins by challenging our need to be seen being good. Most of us have been educated to believe that as long as we're doing well, and that includes being good, all is well. And part of us will want to make sure everyone else knows it too. The tendency to *"sound a trumpet"* expresses it well. Jesus' insistence, that it's the hypocrites who do this 'though, suggests they've something to hide. And I guess that what we think we need to hide is the evidence of any failure or loss, in other words, our humanity. Isaiah is less subtle. There's a mocking tone in the way he asks God their questions. *"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"* It's obvious! You oppress your workers. You're violent. Your fasting looks good, but you don't do, what you say. Isaiah insists they need to change the way they see, but it's only possible to see differently, if we have a theology of failure that allows us to embrace its fruits.

21st century people hide from our inability to tolerate failure, loss and our mortality, by immersing ourselves in "noise". Not trumpets, but celebrity culture, work, shopping, sport, blaming others and so on. If we're scared of failing, of not being good, or of our mortality, we'll allow them to overwhelm us, until they become like anaesthetic that prevents us from feeling life's light and dark, its ups and downs. Recovering from anaesthetics takes time 'though, and it's why I think it's important that we understand failure, in its widest perspective. Not just the failures we cause, the failures Isaiah challenges his people about, those we'll confess later in this service. But also, the failures we're caught up in and suffer, because we're part of God's creation. Vera identified moments like these as belonging to the dark. Isaiah does too, since the implication that *"light shall break forth like dawn"* is that it's been preceded by darkness. So Jesus invites us to go there with him too.

I won't ever forget the last night I spent in Queen's Square, where I had my operation, 15 months ago. Two women came in for brain tumour operations. Angela was in her 40s. She's had an operation 7 years before, but after 7 good years, her tumour was growing again and there wasn't more to be done other than keep it at bay. Liz was facing her first operation, she didn't know what the future would hold, and was apprehensive. We spent the evening talking and laughing and sitting in silence. At one point a doctor came in, and said we were making too much noise with our laughter, this was a hospital. She wasn't serious! We talked about life, death, operations, hospitals, friends, family, God, travel and more, and the memory I have of it is an amazing sense of solidarity. Had someone come and said *"Remember you are dust and to dust you return"*, it wouldn't have been out of place, it would have just been honest. Our conversation wasn't about the fruits of failure, loss or our mortality. But as we talked together, we acknowledged that knowing we are mortal, is what makes our being human.

Lent offers us a time to embrace the fruits of our mortality and failure. You may have already chosen a discipline, but if you haven't, I'd like to suggest that you try silence as a way of nurturing a self-forgetfulness that will enable you to reclaim the aspects of your humanity that you're tempted to avoid. Most of Jesus' instructions in today's Gospel make sense. But *"what are we to make of the suggestion that "when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."* It seems nonsensical, and yet, I think it's the clue to the whole. Jesus is inviting us to turn our attention to God and become self-forgetful. It is silence that makes this possible. When we consciously seek to pay attention to God in silence, we let go of our grasping need to immerse ourselves in noise in order to anaesthetise ourselves, against our mortality. Silence allows all we can't control or manage or understand to be. In silence we acknowledge the things Vera described as dark, the failures we live with that are failures of nature, society's systems and our own, as well as the loss and death that is naturally part of life. But instead of struggling with them, or trying to understand, we sit and pay attention to God as best we can. In time, in God's time and not ours, we are given grace to see them differently. We find ourselves letting go of those that we don't matter. And of coming to understand differently those that do. This rarely happens overnight

and doesn't only happen in prayer. For some, it's the gift of friends who don't need to sort you, or your life out. But Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary, identifies this way of seeing, as the fruit of silence. She says, *"unknowing is essential to receiving knowledge."* And this is surely, what Jesus suggests when he invites us to *"not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."*

Unknowing, allowing ourselves to take the risk of accepting that we do not know, bears fruit. And the fruit it bears is a different sort of knowledge, the knowledge of trust, or faith. Vera's *"sitting with the dark"*, enabled her to see her sister's death, as part of the failure of God's good creation. Angela had accepted that her 7 good years were ending. Liz was at peace when she went to her operation. Each of them saw that death, the failure of life, are true. Life is as it is because creation is not perfect. The cycle of death and resurrection, loss and renewal, is a God-given gift. And that when we can accept this truth, our lives, and the way we see them is changed. So when Vera offers ashes to others now, she sees them as an affirmation of shared mortality, not only with humans, but the whole of creation.

When we embrace our solidarity with creation, we want to reorder our desires, to turn around, to repent. For when we can truly see ourselves as one with all that is, and with Jesus, who Geoffrey Ainger is the *"fundamental statement of God's faith in me and all humanity"*, we will not want to remain as we are. That might sound too passive to you. You might want to do more. But it's how Ash Wednesday invites us to begin Lent. And it's where Lent leads those who will stay close to Jesus. It's why I don't agree that offering ashes to passers-by is cheap grace. It rooted in the conviction that prevenient grace is at work, that God's grace is at work without us knowing it, and before we know it. The prayer in the Methodist baptism service speaks of what God has done for us in Jesus, and then says, *"...all this for you, before you could know anything of it."* And for me, this is where Ash Wednesday and Lent, begins. *"...all this for you, before you could know anything of it."* So *"Remember you are dust and to dust you return"*. Remember your mortality is shared with everyone else here, with every other human being and with all creation. Remember we're all made of the same stuff. Remember that if God created all that there is, God's creation dies, loses and fails, and God still said it was good. For all of God's good creation is subject to the cycle of death and renewal, and that our journey into Lent and beyond, is a journey that leads through death to resurrection. Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen

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