

Ash Wednesday 2021 – Befriending Mortality

'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return'

Scripture offers this beautiful suggestion that we human beings are this extraordinary combination of the dust of the earth and the breath of the divine. This both encapsulates the frailty of our mortality and explains perhaps that uniquely human quest for what lies beyond.

Ash Wednesday is the one day in the Church year which asks us to confront our mortality; to stare the great leveller death in the face and to surrender our end and all that we are to the faithfulness of God. It begins a time in which we are encouraged to search deep within; to examine the territory of our souls; to let go of what we cling too tightly to in order for God to nurture new possibilities; new growth.

The one certain thing about life is that it will come to end; what is less certain of course is what lies beyond. Perhaps that's partly why so many of us have a deep fear of death. Increasingly we as a society have handed death over to the professionals. And yet not so long ago death was an accepted and integrated part of life. People often died at home and the family would wash the body and lay it out in what was called the parlour for people to come and pay their respects. And then at some point we turned to funeral parlours to take the unpleasantness out of it and it was from that point that we started calling parlours living rooms. Some of you might have been watching the documentary 'The real Marigold Hotel' when a gang of OAP British celebrities visit India. In the last of these programmes, they visit an ashram where families bring the dying to be cared for before they are reunited with the waters of Mother Ganges. For the Westerners this enfolding of the family; this normalising of death, this idea that death is but a doorway into another reality, was deeply moving and deeply liberating

In his book 'Being mortal' the surgeon Atul Gwande attributes some of the Western desire to hide away from death to the fact that slowly over the last 50 years, old age and dying have been allocated to the field of medicine; something to be cured or prevented rather than seeing both as a necessary part of life.

We're deeply uncomfortable talking about death but contemplating death shouldn't be a morbid thing; Talking about death is actually a very spiritual exercise; it connects us to our mortality; holding our end before

us gives meaning and significance to our present. That's why in some monasteries monks are encouraged over the course of their lives, to dig their own graves. One spiritual exercise we might want to consider during Lent is to give some thought and preparation to our own funerals; This take something of the taboo and the sting out of our own death, it can be both empowering and a real gift to those we love.

In a few moments we will listen to those words which penetrate to the heart of everything 'remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return; turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'

In one of her books Nadia Bolz Webber asks us to think about our lives as being like a piece of cloth or a ribbon, with our baptism at one end and our death at the other - we don't know the distance between the two. Ash Wednesday, she says 'is a time when that fabric is pinched in the middle and the ends are held up so that baptism in the past and our funeral in the future meet. 'and in that meeting we are reminded of the promises of God. That we are God's, that there is no sin, no darkness, and yes, no grave that God will not come to find us and love us back to life

Ash Wed is about befriending our mortality

The first time I received the ashes on my forehead I was a student at Bible college; it was completely foreign to me and it was one of the most profound moments of my life... it's a stark and moving recognition and trust ... a moment to stare our mortality in the face and then to choose life.... Choosing to turn away from all that is not of life and to embrace the ways of Christ which lead us further into living while we are alive

what does it mean for you to turn away from sin?

What is it that holds you back from becoming more of the person you were created to be?

And what does it mean be faithful to Christ?

Just as Jesus was anointed for his death so ashing is also a preparation for ours; a moment when we ask for both the power to live and the grace to die.

There is such a thing as a good death; we can each leave this world knowing that we have left something of worth. Ash Wednesday asks the question what legacy are we creating with our lives

Let me end with some words from our Wednesday morning healing service 'in the hour of our dying' Healing Spirit set us free'