

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

Sobering words, at anytime but especially when accompanied by the sign of the cross in ashes applied to the forehead.

I remember vividly the first time I knelt before the altar and felt the solid pressure of the Priest's thumb upon my forehead as I received the ashes, and heard those haunting words. I was a teenager and the reality of my mortality was something that had never before registered on my radar. And yet today as I write this I know and have experienced loss and have shared that moment with families again and again as I have taken funerals and listened to the bereaved.

So much so, that now when I hear those words there is that flicker of recognition that my time here is short and there is much I want to do if I am truly going to be all that God has created me to be. With that thought firmly lodge in my mind, I see the ashen stain of sin upon my soul and upon my head publically proclaiming my sin and my penance and I am reminded that much must change if I am to truly be a servant of God.

The practice of "Ashing" has changed much over the years; "originally it was not given to everyone, but only to the public penitents who were brought before the church. Those who were well known sinners were publically marked and their disgrace proclaimed" throughout the streets for all to see.

"As time went on, others began to show their humility and their affection for the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Soon the practice was adopted" by whole congregations in services similar to those we might experience today.

"To wear the sign of the cross in Ash upon your forehead is to readily proclaim and recognise that we are all sinners and the gap that we would like to perceive between the good in us and the bad in us is worryingly fragile and wafer thin". To wear ash is to align oneself with those in our community who are easy to shun as their sin is more publically visible than our own and it reminds us that all sin is grievous in the sight of God, for God sees all and knows all.

For most of us in our day to day lives it is easy to hide away from sin, for our transgressions can be hidden from prying eyes. And in a society which emphasises our individual rights above and beyond the needs of others, there is little to fear from falling

short. And yet by the very nature of Christ's calling, we have a responsibility to stand apart and stand up for what we believe, to recognise the sin we have committed, and to make amends.

Joshua Harris in his poem "The room" talks about this Christian experience of God and sin as if being in an old fashioned library where written on index cards filed shelf upon shelf, is the crude story of our life laid out for all to see. As the poem draw the reader into their deepest embarrassment and shame, where old sins long forgotten are brought in to the cold light of day, Christ appears in the library. Now it is no longer just you and your individual shame, but it is also something seen and witnessed. And if this vulnerability and complete nakedness is not enough, Harris then reminds the reader of the cross and resurrection.

*"Jesus walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things. But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.
.....Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card. "No!" I shouted rushing to Him. All I could find to say was "No, no," as I pulled the card from Him. His name shouldn't be on these cards. But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine. It was written with His blood. He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and began to sign the cards. I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."*

The poem draws to a close with one final line

"I stood up, and He led me out of the room. There was no lock on its door. There were still cards to be written..."

For us at the beginning of Lent it is this choice to walk with Christ or Sin again that we are encouraged to address.

For in this forty day period of Lent we are reminded of our call to repentance, and we are encouraged to regain and refocus our lives.

Lent calls us and helps us to put God back at the centre of our priorities and accept that whilst we are forgiven by grace, with that recognition comes a greater responsibility, for

although we do not have to do anything for God to love us, once we recognise that love we cannot help but respond to it. The great joy then in that realisation is that we do not have to stay the way we are, we can change and we are called to change, but it is a choice which we are freely given.

This Lent then take the time to stop, put aside all distractions and spend time with God. Look to your past, do not be nostalgic about sin, but recognise it, accept it, confess it and move on and together we can journey on through Lent on this the 11:04. Next stop, "temptation..."

ⁱ Malloy S 2010 Reflections on Ash Wednesday Christian resource institute
<http://www.crivoice.org/cyashwed.html>

Harris J The room