

Ash Wednesday
February 6, 2008
Fr. Sanderson
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This morning, after the earliest mass, a parishioner asked a question that is heard almost every Ash Wednesday: If Jesus tells us not to look dismal and disfigure our faces in the Gospel we just heard, why do we go around with ashes on our foreheads? Isn't that the very sort of "pharisaic" practice that Jesus was condemning?

Good question! And if we are ever tempted to wear ashes "into the world" as a sign of some sort of smugness, then we should go wash our faces before we even leave the church.

But perhaps it would be even better to learn more about this sacramental sign and its history.

In Judaism, ashes were a sign of deep repentance. When Jonah announced God's intention of destroying Nineveh, the King of Nineveh believed him, and he sat down in ashes as a sign of his sorrow and hope for forgiveness.

The prophet Jeremiah exhorts the people to repent in these words: Wail, you shepherds, and cry, and wallow in ashes, you Lords of the Flock...

The early Christian Church used ashes in an identical way. Being in communion with the Catholic Church was a most precious privilege. It was not taken lightly. We are so very casual about such things today that we can scarcely imagine it... but in those days, being excommunicated was as a frightful a thing as any soul could imagine. And those whose sins had separated them from the church walked about the streets in ashes and sackcloth, barefoot and pitiful. Far from appearing self-righteous, they were seen as vulnerable and disconsolate....and the sight of such a person was intended to move the heart of Christians to compassion and pity.

It is rather amazing to think about what an ancient observance of Lent might have looked like. Can you imagine coming to mass tonight, if suddenly a ragged band of wailing sinners, faces black with ash, marched down the center aisle, lamenting their sins... begging forgiveness? The exhortation we will hear in our liturgy after the sermon mentions some vestige of such a ceremony, but we can't imagine actually doing it.

But it is still very important to know the context. At some point in history, the church made the choice to take this symbol of mortality and repentance, and apply it generally rather than particularly. And that, may I say, was a very good thing. It leveled the playing field. For we have no righteousness of our own. There is no such Church as one with sheep on the right and goats on the left. We dare not pluck the tares from the wheat because each grows in every human heart.

...And so we come into this church tonight exactly as we came into the world. Stripped of pretense. Vulnerable. Ever so needy. Disabused of the glittering images... The things that thieves can steal and moths destroy lose their alluring charm.

And in the emptiness and stillness of the grave we find the graciousness of God. And he yet again breathes in our nostrils. And his Breath gives life. And the Dust becomes Man. As God became Man. And man is exalted above the angels.

We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well-known; as dying, and behold, we live! As punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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