

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2.1-17; 2 Cor 5.20b-6.10; Mt 6.1-6,16-21

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Church of the Holy Communion

Fr. Patrick S. Allen

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I remember one Christmas morning in my early twenties, that in the bounty of presents given me by my mother, was a book. It was business management guru Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I said, "Thanks, Mom," and tried not to dwell on the implied commentary on my own habits and effectiveness – or, I should say, defectiveness. I did read the book, though, and I still remember one of Mr. Covey's habits common to the highly effective: Begin with the end in mind.

That strikes me as good, sound advice, whether one is beginning a meal, a round of golf, or perhaps even a war.

"Begin with the end in mind." Well, today we begin Lent, a season, as Fr. Clarke reminded us this morning, of intensified, joyful, expectant re-evaluation and reformation of the habits of our hearts, so that we may be more and more fit eternally to share on the light and life of the Blessed Trinity – Light and Life purchased for us on Good Friday and given to us on Easter Sunday.

And so on Ash Wednesday we begin our Holy Lent by bringing the end to mind – to publicly affirm a most obvious but most inconvenient truth: that each of us, should the Lord tarry so long, will die. And we do this in the most striking and unsubtle of ways. Ashes are imposed on our foreheads, and the priest says, "Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return." No – nothing subtle about that. We are, all of us, terminal cases.

"Begin with the end in mind" is just a modern take on the ancient wisdom of the Church, entrusted as it is with the revelation of God. Do you remember Moses' prayer? "Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps 90).

So, this ritualized numbering of our days, this corporate *memento mori* – this Ash Wednesday – is not some guilt-inducing exercise in morbid introspection, but rather a coming to grips with reality, with the intention we will better order our lives in accord with that reality – which is to say, that we may live wisely. Ignoring reality can of course be great fun for a while. I remember one summer's day when I was 16, attempting to drive my friend's '67 Volkswagen bug around a particularly sharp curve – one of those curves that gets sharper as you go around – at 65 mph. As I say, it was great fun for those few seconds to ignore reality, the laws of physics which govern the actions and trajectories of bodies in motion. But it wasn't wise. This occurred to me as the car came to a rest upside down in a cow pasture.

The liturgy for Ash Wednesday brings us to that, again, most obvious but most inconvenient truth: "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment" (Heb 9.27). That is the reality we must face, the reality toward which we must order our lives, a reality we ignore and deny at our own eternal peril.

But it is precisely here that it is not just helpful but absolutely essential to this day's symbolism that our foreheads

are marked not just with ashes as a sign of our own deaths, but with ashes in the form of a cross, a reminder of Another's death - that Good Friday death which brings to us resurrection life. We can make a good beginning to this season of penitence because of the Cross' promise. It frees us to be absolutely honest with God and (even!) our neighbor and truly to repent - which is nothing more than turn from the folly of sin and then to "apply our hearts unto wisdom," to live in accord with the reality of God's love. This Lent let us hold fast to the promise of the Cross where, as we have heard from St. Paul, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5.21).

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