

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

John 8:1-11

The Church of England Lent booklets this year – Dust and Glory – which we are hoping many of us will use as daily readings through Lent - are looking at how we get things wrong. They are based on a book by Bishop Emma Ineson called “Failure”. Not a very catchy title, but my guess is that its one we can all easily relate to.

And today’s service as always on Ash Wednesday in one sense focusses on failure

We have to acknowledge our failure. Our faults. Our mistakes. Our wrongs. Our foolishness and hurtfulness. Which is what tonight us about.

And that can be hard

In the gospel story we read this evening the scribes and Pharisees find it all too easy to see where someone else ha gone wrong. They look at this woman and all they can see is a sinner; a failure. They cannot see beyond the label. And it takes an incisive comment from Jesus to get them to realise that they too are sinners. “Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone”.

Perhaps we are like them. Ready to condemn others but not ourselves. The readings over the next few days in the Dust and Glory booklets – and our studies in our Lent groups next Wednesday – will think about the tendency we have to blame others when things go wrong – a tendency not to see our own faults. As we think of those things, those words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees will no doubt echo – ‘let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.’

As the season of Lent continues we will think about how mistakes are part of life. As we make decisions about our future – be they life changing ones or everyday ones – there will always be the risk of getting things wrong, the virtual certainty of something not going according to plan. But how do we cope with that? Are we fearful of failing, or more concerned about what others think of us. It’s important for us to recognise that we won’t always get it right.

Mistakes; failings, sin – whatever term we use – are things that affect us all then.

*The human propensity to mess things up* is how Francis Spufford describes sin in his book *Unapologetic*. And it affects us all. Sin is not something others do; its something we all do; we are all part of.

And sin is not just an individual thing. Its corporate – what we do affects others to, affects those we know and those we don't; those we love and those we don't. And its built into the structures that govern the world. This is the kind of sin Isaiah talks about when he questions the motivations for people's fasts

*Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

Structural sin we might call it – which doesn't mean the structures are evil, just that as they are human creations they will never be perfect – sometimes far from perfect. Such structural sins are not the fault of any one individual or group of individuals, but we all hold some responsibility for them because we are all human.

And all this can lead us to a kind of despair – is there any good news; is there any hope. And that is where the message of the cross and resurrection comes in. At the time the cross might well have looked like a failure, but through the lens of the resurrection we can see otherwise. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we can be forgiven and have the opportunity for a new start. For the past to be put behind – forgiven and forgotten by God.

So really the focus of tonight's service is NOT failure – it is forgiveness. Because right at the heart of what we as Christians believe is that our faults and failings are not the last word.

As Wendy and I mark foreheads with ashes in a few minutes, we will recall that we were created from the dust of the earth, and will use the words "remember you are but dust, and to dust you shall return".

We are dust, but God can do wonderful things with dust!

**Blessing the Dust**

***For Ash Wednesday – Jan Richardson***

All those days  
you felt like dust,  
like dirt,  
as if all you had to do  
was turn your face  
toward the wind  
and be scattered  
to the four corners

or swept away  
by the smallest breath  
as insubstantial—

did you not know  
what the Holy One  
can do with dust?

This is the day  
we freely say  
we are scorched.

This is the hour  
we are marked  
by what has made it  
through the burning.

This is the moment  
we ask for the blessing  
that lives within  
the ancient ashes,  
that makes its home  
inside the soil of  
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked  
not for sorrow.  
And let us be marked  
not for shame.  
Let us be marked  
not for false humility  
or for thinking  
we are less  
than we are

but for claiming  
what God can do  
within the dust,  
within the dirt,  
within the stuff  
of which the world  
is made  
and the stars that blaze  
in our bones  
and the galaxies that spiral  
inside the smudge  
we bear.