

SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY 24/2/93: GEOFF CHADWICK

"ASHES"

Today of course, is ash Wednesday, and it goes without saying that the central symbols for today's worship is Ash.

Ash is an ancient symbol of humility, repentance and submission; and it was often worn by the Hebrews at times of fasting and penance. Today's gospel reading clearly evidences this fact. We too are about to use the same symbol for the same purpose - but why use ash?

Well it seems to me that there are at least four things that the symbol of ash can represent:

Destruction

Our Very Essence

Fertilization

Dirt

Let's have a look at these.

Destruction. Ash can only be produced by the action of burning a combustible material. After much activity producing heat and light all that is left behind is ash. Ash is the result of a chemical change - perhaps symbolizing the many changes that we undergo in this life. Perhaps we've been through fire, felt tested, been heated, or had our fingers burnt - yet in all these processes we are still here - not the same as we were before, but changed: changed into humble ash. This humble ash reminds us of who we are - beautiful, yet modest creatures made from the dust of the earth.

This brings me to my next point.

Our Very Essence. At every burial or cremation these words are read at the committal of the body "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust". These words are a solemn reminder to all of us of our own mortality: that no matter what we have done with this life, or who we have been, eventually, at death, we are brought to our essential elements. We recall what is ultimately real in life and remember that as creatures we are all made of the "one-stuff" of the universe. What we are made of reminds us of our maker, and this in turn leads to a true humility of spirit.

Fertilization. Ash is a natural fertilizer. In particular, it springs forth new growth after a bushfire. We in Australia know this only too well. New growth after the fire, fertilized by the ashes of destruction must surely be a supreme symbol for the Lenten journey. In Lent we travel towards the day of great destruction when Jesus was nailed up on the cross, but we come through at Easter to the new life which springs forth from the ashes of destruction. In many ways in this life we travel our own Lenten paths, only to find a shoot of new growth springing forth from out of the ashes. A new shoot appears in our own being and we become a new creation. Ash indeed brings us to Easter.

Dirt. Most of us perceive ash to be dirty. Certainly the imposition of ashes tonight will bring this thought home as we unconsciously endeavour to wipe the ash from our foreheads. This is the reason why we impose ashes: to remind us that God's desire for us is to wash us of all of our sins. By sins I mean those things which cause a breakdown in relationships between people, people and the world around them, and people and God. God wishes to wash us of these things that we might build relationships of beauty, strength and honesty with one another. So we wear ash, not to grovel in our own failings, but to recall the forgiveness and cleansing that God is only too happy to grant to us.

* * *

So ash is a symbol which speaks to us with many meanings. It speaks to us of destruction, of change; of change that may be necessary in our own lives; Of our Very Essence, that we may re-capture that sense of humility in knowing that we are of "one-stuff" with the rest of creation; of fertilization, that a new shoot may spring forth from our being as we reflect on our own journey of renewal; and finally of God's forgiving desire as we endeavour to remove that unsightly bit of dirt which is stuck on our forehead.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.