

Homily: Ash Wednesday 2015

The Clown

Last night was Carnival—Mardi Gras. As the evening came to a close I saw a picture of a work of art which I had never seen. It spoke to me.

The work is entitled “Ash Wednesday” by Carl Spitzwig, “the end of Carnival.” It depicts a lone merry maker in a clown costume, with his pointed hat upon his dejected head. He sits upon a slab of stone. Alone. He sits within a chamber of stone around him, with high ceilings. His legs dangle a bit, but his feet are crossed. His body is limp, leaning forward slightly.

No furniture is visible. The height of the ceilings seem to emphasize the lonely air surrounding him.

His merrymaking is over. The fact that he is still in costume makes him look foolish now that it is Ash Wednesday. I wonder who this man is.

Is it perhaps “us?”

Giving up the merry making

I have experienced years and years of Ash Wednesdays. As I left our own merry-marking here at church, left our lovely Mardi Gras party last night, I knew we were part of a universal Christian experience of reveling on Tuesday night before Lent began on Wednesday. I always find a spiritual

satisfaction in the sharing of a common experience with millions of people everywhere! Last night was no different in that regard, nor is today as we come together for Ash Wednesday.

But last night when I discovered the art work of Carl Spitzwig, I really found delight—delight that a piece of art could convey ideas and feelings beyond any words. Having never seen this particular work, I was riveted to the aloneness of the clown.

What a counterpoint of image it is: the Mardi Gras celebratory clown verses the absurdity of a man in a clown costume on Wednesday. He was alone with his thoughts, and perhaps alone with his regrets, his sorrows, his overall sense of let-down.

I ask again: is that clown “us?” Is it you? Is it me?

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is unique among days in the Christian calendar. On no other day do we take burned palms from the previous Easter and apply their ashes to the foreheads of those seeking a spiritual connection with God and with our own human mortality.

This is a practice which emerged in the Middle Ages, but has prevailed. During the Reformation in the West, some Christian communities dropped the practice, but it is in full swing in many different denominations. We no longer single out notorious sinners, or put sinners in sack cloth. We no longer sprinkle ashes upon one another's heads either. We

simply impose the blessed ashes upon foreheads in the form of the cross. It is a singularly somber spiritual act of piety.

We know intuitively that it is time to stop the merry making and spend time pondering the course of life and death. We come to terms with the reality that indeed we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Ironically, there is spiritual comfort in taking this all in, in allowing ourselves to stop the merry go round of life along with the merry making, and be still. Be still with God and be still with our own mortality.

Beginning the Lenten Journey

Today does mark the beginning of the Lenten Journey in the year 2015. As Christians we must prepare our hearts and minds for the glory of Easter by stopping the merry making and focusing upon our own spiritual state. We are called to serious self-examination and repentance.

We are called to take the Lenten Journey seriously. That is why we being today with the act of ashes imposed upon our foreheads. It is a reminder—as visual reminder—of the commitment we have to God and a reminder of the love of God for us, demonstrated through the gift of Jesus, the Christ.

Last week those young Coptic Christian men knelt down for the last time before they were brutally murdered. Their only crime was being Christian. As we wear our ashes tonight, consider that wearing our ashes puts us in solidarity with Christians everywhere, those living and those who have gone to life eternal.

Wear them not with a sense of “pride,” as admonished in our Matthew lesson, but with a sense of honoring God and remembering those who have died for simply being Christian.

Lastly, I ask us to remember that as Christians, we pray for all people of all faiths and of none. We condemn all brutality and violence perpetrated against any person for his or her faith beliefs.

May this Lenten season be one in which we grow spiritually and increase our love of God and love of neighbor and pray for our own souls and that of the world's.

Amen.

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