



Called to Transformation

An address for the Cosmic Mass on Ash Wednesday
1st March 2006 ● Rev Heather

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up - for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground - then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Genesis 2:4-8

Introduction

In the country town where I lived in the forties and fifties, there was a very sharp division between Catholics and Protestants. For the most part, the Catholics went to their school and the Protestants went to the state school, and we shouted insulting comments at one another whenever we passed. Catholics were an unknown quantity. There were certainly none among my friends.

As a teenager I left that environment and went away to Teachers' College. A number of my fellow students were Catholics and I discovered they were actually pretty normal people. One morning I was sitting at breakfast and I noticed something. I said to the girl opposite me, "You've got a smudge on your forehead." She laughed and said, "It's Ash Wednesday." And I said, "Oh," not having the faintest idea what that meant. Well, since then I've learned some things. Like that it's not only Catholics who observe Ash Wednesday.

Some of the first things I learned were that Ash Wednesday was the beginning of Lent, the forty days leading up to Easter, and that Lent was a time of repentance for one's sins, a time for disciplining self by giving up the things you really liked, and of preparation for Easter.

Then I came to the Centre and I learned some different things. I learned that Easter is a powerful time when the effect of Christ's death and resurrection is renewed in the whole world and in us, and that it is important to prepare ourselves during Lent to participate as fully as we can in this mystery.

I learned that I had an astral body which was – and is - in considerable need of transformation from murkiness to light. I learned that one way of assisting this process was not so much to give up something for Lent – like alcohol or chocolate or going to the movies – that is, to take away something – but rather to take something new on board, to develop something new in me – which might be something as simple as making the bed first thing or looking at people in the street. This was a positive kind of discipline that would help to lighten up my astral, and I would probably be much more successful than depriving myself of something, which usually means that my mind gets absolutely fixated on that thing and that is what fills my consciousness.

How does Ash Wednesday assist our transformation?

Last Palm Sunday many of us received a palm cross which we have kept by us as a constant reminder of the path we have chosen to walk in this life.

When the cross was placed in our hands and we received it, this was a conscious act of commitment to our development and growth in consciousness and to transformation. You probably all had a special place to keep your cross, perhaps in your Bible or on your altar, or somewhere you could see it often.

When we received the cross, it was green, like our strongly-felt intentions and hopes for our path. As the year went by, it dried and browned, just as sometimes our intentions flickered and our hopes for ourselves were dented by our experiences. Now it has been burnt, and has become ash. It is with this ash, in which our hopes and intentions are mixed with our weaknesses, that the sign of the cross is made on your forehead and we say:

Remember that you are dust and to dust your body must return.

We also say:

Remember that the spirit of Christ dwells within you and you shall live forever.

Ash Wednesday asks us to somehow hold together these two aspects of our being: the mortal dust and the living spirit. How can we do that? It seems a bit like having two different identities: this morning I'm Barbara and this afternoon I'm Cecelia, depending on whether I am focusing on the material or the spiritual part of my being.

In thinking about how we do this, we are going to metaphorically find ourselves in the Sistine Chapel, looking at that great overview of human existence from creation to the end of the earth. It's good to have this grand picture within us - insofar as we can grasp it - but that can be rather overwhelming. So we will also concentrate on one small part of the panorama, like the meeting of the fingertips of God and Adam. That small part is our life here and now, and what it will be for us during this Lent to walk with Christ the path to the cross and beyond.

The creation of the body

So let's begin with the overview. The story of the creation of humanity in Genesis, chapter 2, can help us to understand a little more about who we are and where we are headed. It says:

The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

We can probably all relate to this picture of creation. As children we moulded animals and people and objects from clay or plasticine or play-dough. We rolled and kneaded our clay or plasticine until it was as near as we could make it to the picture we held in our minds. In Genesis, God, the artist, the creator, is pictured moulding the dust of the earth until a desirable form for humanity is achieved, and then breathing into it the breath of life, or the spirit of life.

Great truths lie behind this picture of the activity of the heavens in bringing us into being, and our teachings tell us of the various spiritual beings and forces involved in forming a suitable body for human beings.

What the heavens gave us is more than a body that is simply material. Our bodies were created not just as lumps of clay; but as something more. One way of thinking about it is that when as children we set out to model something, say a horse, we had a picture of a horse in

our heads, and what we created was an expression of that idea. Even though this expression might be imperfect, something of the idea was contained in the expression and is more or less visible, depending on how closely the model corresponds to the idea.

In the beginning there was no discrepancy between the idea and the expression of this. But when we humans began to become conscious, to enter more fully into the material world, our bodies became more and more dense and less and less an expression of the spiritual body. Death and decay entered the world, and we were seduced into thinking that our bodies were totally of the earth. We lost sight of the spiritual body

When we “remember that we are dust” and also “remember that Christ dwells in us”, we remember that these material bodies have within them the seed of immortality.

Resurrection and the Spiritual Body

When Christ was raised from the dead, it was in that spiritual body – not the material clay. And because in him this body was revealed, and he dwells within us, we have the hope of this glory also. As a single cell multiplies to form the physical body, so the seed of the spiritual body is slowly growing within us once more.

St Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 15. He described the physical and spiritual bodies like this:

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust, the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

That is the hope in us: that we will bear the image of the man of heaven. That is the grand overview of our evolution.

The Close-up

For the present, we have to hold these things in balance within us, recognising the truth of both at this point in our development. The cycle of the spiritual year that moves us from Palm Sunday through Easter and through again to Ash Wednesday and a new Easter season gives us an opportunity to contemplate how we are going in this long work of transformation. We know how difficult it is to carry through our highest intentions. Ash Wednesday and the period of Lent encourage us to revisit our commitments. A new Ash Wednesday is a new beginning in which we acknowledge what is mortal within us as well as what is of the heavens.

In the past Ash Wednesday was a day for repentance. Those who had offended against the standards expected of them by the church would bring their hair shirts to be blessed and would then put them on and begin a forty day fast so that they might be reconciled and welcomed back into the fellowship for the Easter services. For us, it is **not** a time to get out the hair shirts and the whips and to let the voices of our demons shout our shortcomings into our ears and hearts.

The cross of ashes consists of the vertical line which represents our link with the heavens and a horizontal line which is the sign of our mortal earthly life. Together they create the cross of our existence. This is what our human existence is. Remember that you are dust – the horizontal line - and remember also that Christ dwells in you and you are spirit – the vertical line.

What sings in our souls today is that once again we are choosing to consciously follow the path of the Christ. We know that it is a long path and that it is not an easy one – it is narrow and there are many obstacles – but we have decided that we will follow it, that we do want to transform our astral levels and we commit ourselves to doing this.

So shall it be.

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