



Beauty for Ashes

An address for the Cosmic Mass on Ash Wednesday
25th February 2009 ● Rev Heather

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

Isaiah 61:1-3

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8

Around the world, on this day, millions of people are receiving a cross of ashes on their foreheads. In the forty days until Easter, these people, with us, will be contemplating the Easter mysteries - the miracle of life from death and of joy from suffering. We are part of a multitude of followers of the Christ.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath. He was invited to read from the prophet Isaiah. He opened the scroll at the passage we have just heard: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

The passage unfolds the purposes for which the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, the Christ, has been sent:

*to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion (that is, in Jerusalem, in their hearts) -
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

Christ came to give gladness in place of mourning, praise instead of a faint spirit, and a garland instead of ashes or, as some versions read, to give beauty for ashes. These are transforming gifts.

In biblical times, it was a custom for people in mourning or in sorrow to sprinkle ashes on their heads. Christ came to replace those ashes with a garland, to adorn the heads of those who are sorrowful with what is beautiful and joyful.

At the bottom of our garden there is an ash heap. It is where we put the ashes from the fireplace. It is not a particularly attractive spot but, since we can't put ashes in the rubbish bin, they will stay there until we work out how to remove them in a way the Council approves.

We all have some ash heaps in our lives. Perhaps you can picture some of them – things in your life that mar its beauty.

Ashes speak of the transient, that which has no permanency. They can represent for us the destruction of things, of hopes, of relationships, of health. They remind us that in an impermanent world everything has an end, even our physical bodies. As Shakespeare said:

*Golden lads and lasses must
Like chimney-sweepers come to dust.*

That is the reality of our life on earth. All things are passing away. When the ash cross is marked on us tonight, it signifies that we are beings of the earth. We are reminded: *Remember that you are dust and that to dust your body must return.*

The Effects of Impermanence

The impermanence of our lives often causes us distress. Things that we are attached to may wear out, break, get lost, burn, stop working, and we grieve for what has been lost. As many have recently discovered, money that we have today can be gone tomorrow, leaving our hands empty. Homes can be destroyed. Friends, lovers and relatives can move away or die, leaving our hearts empty. Cherished beliefs and ideas can be seen to be unfounded and foolish, leaving an empty space in our minds. With this emptiness comes a sense of loss. Something that has been part of us in some way is no longer there. The ash heap grows. Our heads are covered with ashes.

There is another way of looking at this that fosters hope. The passing away of some things in our lives makes a space, and in that space new relationships, new ways of being, new thoughts can emerge that move us forward in our lives. We discover what is of ultimate importance to us.

If your garden is like ours, some plants have possibly already died or are dying because of the drought. One response we can make to this is to give up on gardening and to turn the whole area into cement or paving. Another response we can make is to create something new, living and attractive that will survive in the future conditions we have to plan for. It is not a simple process. It may mean giving up cherished ideas of how a garden should be. But when there is an impulse and a will to create beauty, new ideas and images emerge in us.

The National Rhododendron Gardens in Olinda were begun in 1960 by an enthusiastic group of people. Two years later, a bushfire swept through the area and destroyed much of what had been created. But these people shared a vision. They had a will to create beauty out of the ashes. Over forty-five years later there are forty hectares of beautiful gardens for us to enjoy, which are visited by people from around the world.

What Rises Up in People

What is it that enables people to rise up in times of “ashes” and to move forward to life and newness? What has motivated the people of Flowerdale to co-operate in building temporary homes so that their community can remain together while its future direction is planned? What has motivated a woman from Marysville, in the midst of the devastation of that township, to encourage people to propagate plants for the new public gardens that will one day grace Marysville?

What motivates a person to turn a destructive lifestyle into a positive one? What motivates us to pick ourselves up when we have taken an emotional or spiritual tumble and to get going again? It is the determination not to be overcome but to overcome. It is the spirit that is within us, whether we are conscious of it or not.

The Easter mystery reveals the possibility that something alive and beautiful can be born out of the ash heaps in our lives. Christ came to give us beauty instead of ashes. His spirit is life-giving.

When the cross is placed on your forehead tonight, you will not only be reminded of your mortal nature but also that you are a spiritual being: “Remember that the spirit of Christ dwells in you and you will live forever.” There is an eternal part of us that continues through the transitory and sometimes painful experiences of earthly life and beyond. We are more than beings of the earth. We are also spirit.

Strengthening this Spirit

Lent gives us a great opportunity to strengthen the consciousness of our nature as spiritual beings.

Lent is a time when people discipline themselves. Some people, for instance, will not eat particular foods; others will deny themselves something they enjoy in order to give to people in need. The goal is to deepen spiritual life, to purify the astral body. It is a time for self-examination and reflection.

It is a time to do as Paul says in Colossians – to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”.

That is a good starting point for thinking about the focus of our Lenten journey – to set our minds on the eternal, not on the transient. The King James Version says: “Set your **affection** on things above.” It is to turn our minds and hearts towards the things that are of lasting value. It is not to be caught up in the illusion that this life is everything. As our final song says, it is not to “look for cheap success within the ways and values of the world.” It is to be conscious of what is eternal at the centre of our being.

As we prepare ourselves to enter into the mystery of Golgotha, we will be contemplating the events of Easter and of what has come to us through Christ’s death and resurrection. The path we will walk leads us away from our ash heaps, towards life and beauty. Paul gives us wonderful advice for this walk when he says:

*Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.
Philippians 4:8*

This is how the beauty Christ gives expresses itself in us. It is by focusing on what is of the highest excellence – in ourselves, in our surroundings, in others. This Lenten discipline will change our thinking and our astral bodies. It will enable the Christ in us to be more fully expressed. It will move us from fasting to feasting.

*Fasting from falsehood... feasting on truth
Fasting from the dishonorable ... feasting on the honorable
Fasting from injustice ... feasting on justice
Fasting from what is unwholesome ... feasting on purity
Fasting from the unattractive ... feasting on the lovely
Fasting from insensitivity ... feasting on graciousness
Fasting from mediocrity ... feasting on excellence
Fasting from criticism ... feasting on praise.*

The more we give these great Christ-like qualities room in our hearts and minds, the more the undesirable things will slip away. And the more Christed we will become.

The Lenten journey is one of fixing the mind on what is of lasting value and worth. We begin with ashes, with an acknowledgement of our mortality and our imperfection. We walk the way

of the cross with Christ, until we come to the triumph of Easter Day with “the beauty of the Lord our God upon us.”

So shall it be.

Works from Rev Mario Schoenmaker
Used with permission
Antoinette Schoenmaker ©

The Centre in Melbourne
The Independent Church of Australia ©
email: melbournecentre@ica.org.au
web: <http://www.ica.org.au/melbourne>