

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
Ash Wednesday (C)
Sunday, March 6, 2019

Isaiah 58:1-12 | Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 | Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I was privileged to spend last Saturday with a group of people who are becoming members of Christ Church. We talked about many things, and it was wonderful to see such engaged and thoughtful people being drawn to the life of the faith here. What was also fascinating was the fact that they have all travelled so many different roads to get here. Only three of us, out of sixteen, are cradle Episcopalians. The rest had come by various routes from various places to be there last Saturday. Our road to God involves families and communities, but it is also our own road, and quite unlike any other.

Here is part of a short love poem written by Philip Larkin called 'No Road' in which he describes an imagined lane that runs from his house to that of an estranged love he has almost lost forever.

“Since we agreed to let the road between us
Fall to disuse,
And bricked our gates up, planted trees to screen us,
And turned all time's eroding agents loose,
Silence, and space, and strangers - our neglect
Has not had much effect.

Leaves drift unswept, perhaps; grass creeps unmown;
No other change.
So clear it stands, so little overgrown,
Walking that way tonight would not seem strange,
And still would be allowed. A little longer,
And time would be the stronger,

Drafting a world where no such road will run
From you to me;
To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others, is my liberty.
Not to prevent it is my will's fulfillment.
Willing it, my ailment.”

As we gird up our loins, and set off on this forty day journey towards Easter today, it occurs to me that Lent is about returning along a familiar road. Yes, it is about going forward, about growing in our spiritual life, about marching toward the eternal light of the Easter dawn, but it is, perhaps more than all these things, about going home. Walking down a well-known road we have not really travelled for a while, to a familiar place, and a love, we have to some degree or other, let time's eroding agents loose upon.

Perhaps 38 years ago I remember an Ash Wednesday sitting on my own at the early service in Aberdeen Cathedral in Scotland. Surprisingly, I was the only person there. I think the tradition of the Imposition of Ashes, and the observance of Ash Wednesday had not then been established for a time. So I, and the priest, celebrated the liturgy just the two of us in that great empty Cathedral which was usually pretty full on a normal Sunday.

Disappointing as the turnout was, it did make that service very special indeed for me. The stillness and space seemed to surround us, for me at least, not with emptiness, but with a profound sense of God's presence. I imagine many of you have had that experience in Cathedrals at times. There is something about being there, almost alone, that allows the building to speak. All the countless prayers that have been said there, down the hundreds of years, seem to permeate every pore of every stone. You are alone, but never less alone in fact.

As I went forward to receive the Ashes and the priest said the words "Remember O man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return," I remember feeling a profound sense of being part of the great company of faith. A feeling that was, strangely, all the greater for there being no one there but the priest and me.

When you think about it, the cross of ashes is placed on exactly the same place on our foreheads as where the anointed cross of baptism is made. The cross that means to us that we are forever marked as God's own child, the mark of new life, and of our membership of that mystical body which is the Church, and the mark of our entrance into the first outlying suburbs of God's Kingdom.

The cross today is a 'memento mori', a reminder that we are one day going to die, and, in that, there is certainly the knowledge of how cold the world would be if, one day, there were no road back to God for us anymore. Yet, taken together, the message of the cross of baptism and the cross of ashes, is not one of gloom but of hope.

By remembering that our lives are finite we are also reminded of how precious the time we have now is. It makes us look more intentionally at the road ahead, and at this road back to God that lies before us in this season of return. Silence and space and strangers have perhaps left it somewhat overgrown and neglected, but it is still there, our way home still lies open, thank God!

So whatever you are planning to do this Lent, let it be something that helps you walk down that road, once again, back to the Father that waits at the gate for all his sons and daughters to return home.

When we repent, we are changing direction, taking that different road. When we turn away from our sins we are putting down heavy burdens. When we give up some activity or some indulgence, we are freeing up some part of ourselves, and our lives for this journey. When we give some extra part of our selves away, we are giving away what we do not need in order to reach out to something that we profoundly need. When we seek silence and space, it is not the silence and space of strangers, but the stillness in which we can experience that great company of God's kingdom that surrounds us. There we can rest, and then step quietly down the lane to the back gate of our Father's house.

May this Ash Wednesday, for all of us, begin that glad journey of return for our hearts. Today we are in that precious moment between the cross of ashes and the cross of anointed life, the cross that marks the boundaries of God's Kingdom in this realm of physical things, and that marks our road to life.

It strikes me now, that all those years ago in that empty Cathedral in Aberdeen, I began my Lent under a nave roof that had 50 large and colorful crests emblazoned on it that stretched from one end of the cathedral to the other. They were the crests of the 50 States that make up this country, put there by the American Church as a thanks for the consecration, near that very spot in Aberdeen Scotland in 1784, of Bishop Samuel Seabury, the first Bishop of the newly independent American Episcopal Church. We cannot see where the road we are on is leading us but God can see!

So wherever we are, even if we are in a very bad place, like the prodigal son, sitting miserably tending the pigs on the farm as far from home as he could possibly be, today we can look up and remember that we came from somewhere, and that we have a home to go to. A road still lies open for us, and we can say to ourselves,

“I will arise and go to my Father.”