

Ash Wednesday

10/2/16

“Looking Back Moving Forward...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

During the early 2000's I found myself teaching at a small family school with one class per grade, not very far from this church. What made this school special was that it was known as a progressive “cross-over “school, where pupils from different areas were bussed in. This gave our little school a unique cross-cultural flavour that was very special so soon after the first democratic election in South Africa.

At the time, the Dept of Education sponsored a very interesting video series made for primary school children. The series took a cross section of South African children from various races and cultures and integrated them into a video series on the early history of our country, with a specific focus on Apartheid. The result was a very user friendly theme that was easy to watch, understand and generated interesting conversations in the classroom. The title of the series, I will never forget, “Looking Back, Moving Forward.”

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent for Christians around the world. The ashes we receive on our forehead in the shape of a cross serve as an outward sign of our sinfulness and need for penance. The ashes also symbolise our mortality, a reminder that one day we will die and our bodies will return to dust. Hence the traditional words, “Remember thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.”

The tradition of receiving the ashes has its origins in the Old Testament, where sinners performed acts of public penance. It was actually Pope Urban II who in the 11th century recommended that all Catholics take part in the practice of receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday. In the 12th century it became customary that the ashes used on Ash Wednesday were made by burning the previous year's palm branches.

Ashes also symbolise grief, in this case , grief that we have sinned and caused division from God. So, in a sense, the ashes are a symbol of penance made sacramental by the blessing of the church, and they help us develop a spirit of humility and sacrifice.

So, some of you may be asking why the introduction to the sermon about the little family school that I taught at all those years ago?

Good question.

Well, you see, do you remember the title of the video series that attempted to explain the historic past of South Africa to the budding pupils? “Looking Back Moving Forward.”

For some or other reason, whenever Ash Wednesday comes around every year, this video series pops into my mind. I think the title is very catchy and particularly applicable to us as Christians this time of the year.

Why?

I believe that Ash Wednesday is a very good time for all of us as Christians to take stock of our lives. Our lives in total. Our relationships, with one another and with God by the way. Our focus. Our energies. Our career. Our wounds. Our goals. Our dreams. Our aspirations. Our lives.

Ash Wednesday is a very good time for us to reflect upon those things in our lives that separate us from God, divide us from one another and push the holy spirit away. We all have things in our lives that keep us from the glory of God. All of us. Even me.

So in effect, I have this vision of the Cross in front of me, with Jesus calling me to Him, to be with Him.

There I am, in my life, trying to walk towards the Cross and Jesus in everything that I do... except there is one problem... I note that when I reflect upon my life, like I do on Ash Wednesday, I find that instead of keeping my eyes focussed on the Cross and Jesus, I am more often than I would like ‘looking back’ and not forward to Jesus. The result, from a symbolic point of view, is that because I am looking back over my shoulder into my past, I find myself stumbling. I stumble because I can no longer see the path clearly to Jesus. I

stumble because I am focussing on what has already happened in my life, the past hurt, failed goals, failed relationships and areas that I am struggling to let go.

You see, so many of us really struggle to let go the past. The result is that we waste our God given energy on things we can no longer change, things that we need to hand over to God, things that we need to forgive ourselves for. It is only when we focus our sight strongly on the Cross and Jesus in front of us, that we are able to remain close to God, walk in His light and grow in His spirit.

This is no easy task, for many of us are creatures of habit and sometimes we enjoy our comfort zones of being the victim. It takes strength and courage to step away from our past, even therapy sometimes, but it is possible, even more so when we ask Jesus to walk with us. Ash Wednesday for me is all about thanking God for my past, both the good and the bad, but looking to the future, looking forward, looking to Jesus on the Cross.

My challenge to you this Lent is exactly that. Let us as brothers and sisters in Christ, stop our head turning to our past lives, and instead, look ahead to Jesus, so that we can grow together.

What better time to start this as right now?

May God bless you this Lent as you strive to move forward with your life and ultimately closer to Jesus.

Amen.