

I have mixed emotions about Ash Wednesday. Not simply because lent addresses two contradictory aspects of who I am - of who we all are - but also because for me, personally, it carries memories of what can only be called...shame.

The shame of a 9 year old boy in a basically protestant school, with generally atheist peers, whose Irish catholic grandmother has just burst in to 2nd period Maths, strode across to him and smeared an ash cross on his forehead...

The shame of a romantically nervous fourteen year old on a first date, who looks up with horror from his prawn cocktail, to see the same grandmother bearing down on him to perform the same ceremonial besmirching in front what might otherwise, I like to think, have become a new girlfriend.

Remember you are dust an to dust you shall return? Well on those occasions - and all those like them - I certainly remember wanting to crawl into a hole and die!

But despite my very personal associations, Ash Wednesday is not actually an occasion for shame, something my Gran knew very well. Even if her methods unwittingly conveyed the opposite.

It is however, traditionally, importantly and deliberately, an occasion of mixed messages - of apparent contradiction...

So in the appointed Office readings for Morning Prayer on the first morning of the Lenten Fast, we hear God through Isaiah condemn the fasts of his people, and demand instead justice and compassion towards the outcast; and in our Gospel today we hear Jesus explicitly tell his followers "when you fast do NOT disfigure your faces like the hypocrites but put oil on your head and wash your face...", just before we line up to dirty our faces and put ash not oil our heads.

And what is more - in this single act of worship we kneel in the same place to be marked with a reminder of mortality, and mere moments later, to receive the first fruits of immortality. We are marked after the fashion of a curse, with the dust that is the token of *the* curse, but dust that has been blessed with the holy water of our baptism, bestowed in the manner of *that* anointing - on our foreheads with the sign of the cross...

At one and the same time, we are told that our prayer and penitence should be private matters of the heart - seen and rewarded by God alone, AND that we should confess our sins to one another, just as we have been told to pray in our closets, but to say **OUR Father.**

This public/private contradiction is of course embodied in the feeling of shame - that very physical emotion I felt flushing my cheeks as surely as the ash coloured my forehead as a boy.

Shame, and its slightly less evil twin, guilt, are emotions that live at the interface of our private and public selves, in secrets we feel we know about ourselves, and things we fear others might feel about us; in the tension between what we perceive to be our real selves, and public perception of us; in our fears ultimately of being cut off and cut out, of punishment perhaps, but of stigma most of all.

As *Christians* however, we have a somewhat complicated relationship with stigma, with the ostracised and scandalised, with the objects of shame.

So this rite we partake in today is carefully calibrated, not to inculcate or express shame - even if secrets we carry in our inward parts might cause us to feel it - that is not the purpose of acts of penitence; nor to give voice to self-righteous pride (one of shame's other alter egos), but rather to impress upon us our solidarity, in place of our isolation...

Our solidarity with one another in our mortality, our solidarity with one another in open acknowledgement of the thing of darkness to be found in each and all of us, and most shocking of all - our solidarity with the one whose disapproval we might justly fear, but who has expressed his love for us, and *his* chosen solidarity with us, by becoming the outcast, the punished, the stigmatised.

Shame and guilt both stem from the fact that there is more than one person in the body I call 'me' - but that too, gloriously, is what gives rise to the apparent contradictions in so much of our worship.

"Do i contradict myself?" Asked Walt Whitman. "Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes."

And he is not alone. We all do.

We are all, as James puts it, double minded - we all contain, if not multitudes, than at least the multiple versions of ourselves - the self we want to be and the self we feel we are - which allow us to feel shame, and which can only be acknowledged and addressed by stories and liturgies which incorporate such a contradiction.

So the Bible, like our popular folk tales, demonstrates a remarkable fondness for twin figures, or siblings at least - who can embody the multiple aspects of the hearers:

Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Adam and Christ.

And so our key symbols offer twin meanings plaited together, the crown of thorns uniting sovereignty and helplessness, or its own mirror in the palm cross - an icon of acclaim, and one of humiliation, woven into one token...the very token which today we burn to mark our own brow with an echo of Cain's shame, and of our common heritage in Adam and in death...

and yet a marker in the ambivalent sign of the cross, of another possibility.

The possibility of an offering like Abel's which can be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.

The possibility of redemption in the very humanness of our humanity, in the last Adam, the offer of eternal life through a life poured out, the promise of transformative love even in the midst of tragedy and transgression.

If Advent is a season for contemplating, in preparation for the feast of the Incarnation, the contradictory combination in Jesus, of the Divine and the Human; then Lent is a season for contemplating, in preparation for the feast of his Passion, the contradictory combination in ourselves (though Baptism) of Adam and Christ, the old self and the New, and a time for kneeling with our brothers and sisters in penitence.

Penitence, not shame...*penitence* - that old fashioned and much misunderstood word which, unsurprisingly, in our faith signifies two things at once: Signifies our corporate recognition that we fall short, that we are not and cannot be enough, that we need the Other; the act of humbling ourselves in the eyes of The Lord - and signifies our acknowledgement that nonetheless He is nearby - that he draws nearer to us still, sweetly questioning, bidding us welcome; the enacting of our faith that he will lift us up (in Christ).

As the start of this penitential season, Ash Wednesday - like love itself - is by definition a mixed emotion. And a mixed message. Not just for me, but for us all.

**It is the *twin* confession that we are dust. And that God is mindful of us.
It is the mark of our commitment to treat our fellow human beings accordingly,**

It is the public expression of those who have resolved to rend their hearts not their garments, those determined to offer in secret the twin fasts he requires - denying self and giving ourselves to others.

It is ultimately the resolution to not turn away from our flesh and blood...but to see our flesh and blood taken up into the life and love of God in and through the cross.