

Ash Wednesday

Our Bishop sent out an interesting email just the other day, and in it, he is asking questions about the imposition of ashes on our foreheads.

He got thinking about wearing ashes on our forehead because the gospel reading for today, from Matthew's gospel, as we just heard, is about Jesus telling folks not to show off your piety.....

And so, the question the Bishop is asking is whether wearing ashes is showing off our piety, and maybe something we should rethink.

It's good to have bishops who think about things like this, don't you agree?

His comments certainly got me thinking about why we do this thing with ashes, and whether it does conflict with what Jesus is telling us today.

Since I get to give the homily, I guess I get to give you my thoughts about this today, but I'd really like to hear yours after the mass as well.

The bishop's musings reminded me of one of our members who asked about why we call our priests "Father" – because, she noted, Jesus also said to call no man Father, only our father in heaven.

This wasn't something that bothered our parishioner, but her daughter was with New Hope and raised the question about it.

So as I thought about the bishop's remarks, I thought about how different traditions read the Bible, how we read the words of our Lord, how we interpret gospel truth.

Our New Hope friends like to say they read the Bible literally, meaning, I guess, that whatever the reader thinks she is reading is what it must mean.

The older Christian traditions tend to read scripture with more attention to the original language, the original setting, and to the intent and spirit of the words, and the Episcopal church is squarely within that older tradition.

So with that in mind, I guess I don't really see any conflict with wearing ashes on our forehead and Jesus' admonition not to parade our piety.

Here's why.

Jesus was pointing to folks who dressed up wearing ostentatious religious objects and clothes, who prayed aloud and maybe loudly in public squares, and who, it

seemed to Jesus, were less interested in witnessing to God than in drawing attention to themselves.

But the point of these ashes is not to parade our piety, but rather to witness to the one thing that our modern society absolutely hates, the one thing our culture despises, the one thing 21st century America refuses to confront: that one thing is death.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we say at each burial service.

We return from whence we came, and just as Adam was made when God took some dirt and fashioned it into a man, so we return to dirt at our death — but for the grace of God.

That we as a culture deny death is as near as your next TV commercial or TV show: just look at all the viagra commercials and the number of face lift operations.

Did you watch the Academy Awards the other night?

Did you see poor Kim Novak, a real beauty in her youth, with so many plastic surgeries she could hardly open her mouth.

We worship youth in America and we ignore and reject death.

So when Christians show up in public with the sign of death on our foreheads, once a year, I think that rather than showing off our piety, we are instead witnessing to the power of God in this world: it is a power that comes through in weakness, in vulnerability, in suffering endured and in sins forgiven.

The ashes are made in the sign of the cross.

The substance of death, the ashes, is joined to the manner of death, the cross, on which God, becoming incarnate and human, dying for us so that death is no longer our final destiny.

But the truth of our faith is that enduring death is the only avenue to receiving real life.

Not just the death that comes when we each of us close our eyes for the last time, but the deaths that come when facing disease or disappointment or loss.

The deaths that come when we must face up to our own ego, and let go of justifying pride, the deaths that come as we surrender old ways of thinking about life and

community and as we begin to discover that new life that Jesus calls us into: one that welcomes the outsider, that forgives the injury not seven but seventy-seven times; the one that accepts death as a fact of life and embraces it, because only by facing our own deaths can we really learn how to live.

So the bishop offered some alternatives to the receiving of ashes in our diocese.

He says you can refuse them or you can receive them as usual but wash it off right after or you can ask me to sprinkle them on your head, so you will wear them, just not visibly, or you can receive them and wear them as usual.

But for me, I hope you will receive them and wear them, and do so as a sign to this youth-intoxicated society that it is in death where we come to meet real life, that it is in the depths of human tragedy that we come to find wisdom, and that the God of all that is does not abandon us to the dirt, but with his son, shall raise us up on the last day.

That is the sign of the ashes on your head.

Wear them with the quiet assurance that you are a disciple of the Living God, and do not be afraid.

+amen