

**St Serf's/St John's Joel 2.1-2, 12-17;
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21 6 March 2019 (Ash
Wednesday)**

I have many questions about Ash Wednesday. Some are deeply theological - about the nature of sin and redemption.

Others are slightly more prosaic. For example, when is it OK to wipe the ash off our foreheads? On our way back to our pew? Before leaving church? When we get home?

Before bed? I confess, I have been an inveterate 'leaver-on' of ash - mainly because it prompts so many useful conversations. "Jim, did you know you've got a smudge on your face?", "It's Ash Wednesday", "Oh, is it? What's that about again? etc.

We like symbols in the Episcopal Church. They help us articulate deep truths and understand complicated and

sometimes inexpressible ideas. Ash on our foreheads today acts both as a symbolic reminder of our own mortality - and thus the urgency of our need to make things right between ourselves and our Lord - and as an expression of our penitence. We are sorry, and being marked with ash shows that we are sorry, we regret our sins and firmly resolve to make both reparation and amends.

This does, however, throw up a couple of challenges to me that I confess I have not entirely resolved. Firstly, do we actually believe we are really that sinful? Have we really done so many terrible things that we need to repent in this dramatic way for them? Are we really that bad?

In part, the answer to this lies in understanding a little better what we actually mean when we talk about sin. It's worth remembering that when the gospels talk about sin, the word they use is a Greek one - hamartia. And this is a word most commonly used of archers to describe them missing the target, or missing their mark. When we sin, we miss the point. We get our priorities upside down, aim ourselves and our lives in a direction away from where we should be aiming and as a consequence end up away from where we should be. And I think, certainly speaking for myself, it's a constant challenge to be focussing where I should - and what I see of the priorities of the world leave me to suggest that that is true also for society itself. So in that sense, although individually we might be kind and generous and faithful and all the other nice things we are, I

do suspect that our priorities are often awry - that we are missing the target, missing the point.

The other challenge I have for Ash Wednesday has to do with the symbol of the ashing and its purpose. Because the effect of being ashed is to draw other people's attention to the fact that we have been ashed, and that it is Ash Wednesday. So when we read, as we do in Matthew's gospel today, that we are warned against outward shows of religion and piety and in particular against trumpeting our fasting and self-denial, then I wonder if that is not exactly what we are doing when we are ashed. Are we actually drawing attention to ourselves to show the world how religious and good we are (and by implication what a bunch of heathens they are)?

I hope not. I hope that our motivations for Ash Wednesday and for Lent are about ourselves and about the world we find ourselves in. But we do need to be mindful that symbols are powerful things and need to be used with care: and that they are only a part, a beginning of a discipline that should properly last not only throughout Lent but through all our discipleship - that the changes we make in ourselves in response to our sense of our own need for repentance are not to be temporary, fleeting things, but a reordering of our priorities and lifestyle - a recalibration of our sights if you like, to make our aim true again and focussed where it must be - on Jesus and the bringing of his kingdom.

My friends, we are marked with ash today as a symbol of our mortality, a reminder that our time on this earth is short and thus that our repentance is urgent. We none of us know what lies ahead. So while we may, let us turn away from sin, be faithful to Christ and give thanks to God. And may we all keep a holy, peaceful and blessed Lent.

Amen