

ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON

22 February 2012

Trinity College Chapel

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“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

(Matthew 6. 21)

Only gloomy souls look forward to Ash Wednesday in the same way that the rest of us may look forward to Christmas or Easter. The reminder of our mortality with the imposition of ashes, and the Gospel call to strict prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, hardly seem to affirm life in all of its fullness. Yet, the Lenten season, I think, when seen in the context of what it prepares us for – namely the joy of the resurrection – is all about affirming life. How can we understand this apparent paradox, the juxtaposition of death and self-denial with life and self-affirmation?

We might do well by beginning to explore what we commonly think about death. All too often, I suspect, we seek for ways to deny, hide from, or embrace on our own terms something which is, after all, our common destiny. We all spend money (some more than others) on cosmetic ways to deny our growing age or seek miraculous exercise and dietary regimes to postpone the inevitable. Until we are faced with the death of a close loved one, the reality of death is typically hidden away in care homes, hospices, and hospitals from the majority of us. And recently, the Commission on Assisted Dying outlined a legal framework that would permit those who had been diagnosed with less than a year to live to seek an

assisted suicide. While all of these tendencies and issues are, of course, culturally and morally complex, they together portray a perceived disjunction between death and life, the former being something to be managed and hidden away from the latter.

Christian tradition, however, holds within it a very different understanding of the link between death and life. Rather than being disjunctive and incompatible, Christianity suggests a way in which death prepares one for life, and in fact enables one to lead a fuller, richer life than if one wilfully ignores mortality. The late medieval period saw the emergence of what became known as the art of dying well. This *ars moriendi* was expressed in written texts, wood engravings, and works of art, all of which, on the one hand, reminded people of the certainty of death but which also laid out advice upon how to lead a moral, happy, and full life such that, when death comes, one can be content that one's life was a good one and that one can trust in God's love. The art of dying well was really all about the art of living fully. Whatever its apparent historical oddity, such an art is something of which we have sadly lost sight.

The imposition of ashes expresses something similar to the art of dying well by offering an opportunity to remind ourselves that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. While death seems gloomy, an awareness of mortality brings into focus two wonderful, life-affirming things. First, if we come from dust, then we should recognise the fact that God has breathed life into us, just as he breathed life into Adam. Life is a great gift and one to be pursued fully. Second, if we return to dust, then, through Christ, we are assured that he has come to give us life, and life abundantly in eternity. Death is not an end to be dreaded or avoided, it is a call to preparation, self-awareness, and the pursuit of life in all of its excellence, both now and to come.

What does such an art of living and dying well look like, then? Today's Gospel reading, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, provides, in a loose way, a set of artistic guidelines for living and dying well. Whatever we do is to be seen from the perspective of mortality and eternity: "do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (Matthew 6. 19-20) On the surface, Jesus' teaching about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting may seem strict, stultifying, and wrapped up in the impossible ideal to "be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5. 48) In context, however, these teachings are about how we orient our lives in light of who Jesus is, the coming of God's kingdom, and our own salvation from death and sin. Jesus' Sermon does not exhaust what the Gospel means and is one part of a wider story of God's love for his creation. As such, the teachings talk to people as they are overtaken by a life-changing and life-enhancing meeting with God. This meeting with God remakes an individual and begets a new life. Within this new life, Jesus' teachings look back from the perfect love, justice, and harmony of Gods' kingdom and into our present lives. Faced with hate, injustice, and violence, our purity of intentions and actions matter both because they reflect God's will and because they unlock our own potential for participation in God's rule of peace. Such fullness of life paradoxically requires humility and self-forgetfulness: the Gospel calls us to pray, fast, and give in secret such that we do these things out of right intentions as well as doing them at all. Ironically, remembering our limitedness, taking up our cross and following Jesus to death, enables us to know life in its fullness, to be pure in act and intention.

In the apparent gloominess, then, of Ash Wednesday and indeed of Lent, we may find the richness of the life that God promises. Death calls us to life, to die to our old selves and so be raised to a better one, enriched by God. In dying to our sense of self-importance,

we discover the art of living well. As such, death holds no proper fear but focuses God's activity so that it flows backwards into our present lives and forwards into our lives to come. Death and mortality also focus our co-operation with God's movement in our lives. One's treasure tells the tale of one's heart and describes what kind of art of living and dying one has. This Lent, may we strive to practise the divine art in our daily lives. Amen.