

17 February 2021
Ash Wednesday

10am St Peter's
7pm Cathedral of the Holy Spirit

Joel 2:12-18
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

There is something deeply ironic and odd about what we do today/tonight. We hear Jesus in our Gospel reading telling us not to practice our piety in ways visible to others and not to disfigure our faces but to wash them, on the one day we would consider disfiguring our faces publicly to go from here bearing an ashen cross.

There is a deep irony and oddness within 21st century society too.

On the one hand we fill our lives with things that are *fake*: we may decorate our homes with fake plants and flowers; we sit at desks and on chairs that are made from a material that pretends to be wood; as tourists we pay to experience what is often merely a constructed representation of the culture or environment we've gone to explore; we may work to carefully curate an online identity that bears little resemblance to how we actually look and think and feel.

While on the one hand there is a great deal that we seem to value in our modern life that is actually fake, on the other hand we may discover that there is a deep longing in our society for *authenticity*. My Google search on the phrase "quest for authenticity" turned up hundreds of articles, with this quest apparently going on in most spheres of human existence.

After many years of writing books on business and leadership, Dutch management scholar and psychoanalyst Manfred Kets de Vries turned his attention to four key facets of life in his 2009 book, 'Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death'. At the heart of the book in relation to each of these matters is the quest for authenticity.¹

de Vries writes: "I realise the importance of authenticity in my own life and the lives of others. I have seen how easy it is for someone to follow a route to self-deception and illusion. Fooling ourselves, as many of us learn the hard way, isn't sustainable in

¹ The following quotes are from <https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-management/the-quest-for-authenticity-1460>

the long run.”

He continues: “To me, being authentic implies being honest, truthful with myself and others, living ... with my own values and principles, and experiencing a sense of meaning in what I’m doing. Authenticity implies a willingness to accept what I am and not attempt to pass for something or someone else. Authenticity means not only trusting my strengths but also my weaknesses and being patient with my imperfections. It has to do with having the courage to say how things are, to say no, to face the truth, and to do the right thing because it is right.”

“In searching for the meaning of life,” he writes, “we’re really aiming to feel alive. We want our experiences, the external reality, to resonate with our internal reality. Only when our personal activities are consistent with our values, commitments, and other important elements of our concept of ourselves will meaning be attained.”

But Jesus was talking about authenticity about two thousand years before de Vries. Or rather, Jesus was challenging authenticity’s opposite: *hypocrisy*. The word *hypocrite* originally referred to actors in the theatre, people who are acting a part other than their real selves, people who are putting on a show. And well before the time of Jesus the word had come to be used in its metaphorical sense of anyone who puts on a show of virtue or goodness.

Jesus said to his followers, “When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do to be honoured by men; when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites who love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men; when you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.”

Jesus’ issue is not with the giving, praying, fasting as such; but with the show that accompanies it, performed for the sole purpose of impressing others.

The question Jesus is asking, and the challenge Jesus is making, is about what *motivates* our actions. Our motivation should not be about making ourselves look good. Our motivation should never be self-serving.

When it comes to the risk of hypocrisy, we are all in the frame.

There is even the risk of hypocrisy in coming here to participate in worship and to receive an ashen cross on our foreheads: it all depends on what motivates us.

At one level we draw on a tradition dating back perhaps as far as the eighth century in observing this day with the imposition of ashes. The imposition of ashes of course has its origins in the very ancient practice of throwing dust and ashes over one's head to signify repentance before God.

Dust reminds us of our status as part of the created order – in Genesis 3, God tells the man who has eaten the forbidden fruit “you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. You and I are not God; God created us along with the dust and everything else.

Ashes were associated with the desolation of cities burned to the ground by invading armies, and signified judgement, weakness, emptiness – and hence the connotation of grief.

Remembering our weakness, fallibility, and mortality reminds us that we are not in charge, and challenges us with the deep questions of the meaning of our existence.

What we symbolise with an ashen cross, Paul *lived* in a life of suffering.

Paul's own suffering, and also the fact that he could endure this suffering (as he says, persecuted but *not* forsaken, perplexed but *not* driven to despair, and so forth), are the signs that he was embodying the covenant faithfulness, the covenant love, of the living God. Paul's suffering, and the problems of which the Corinthians are tempted to be ashamed, are actually the mysterious revelation – just as Christ on the cross was a mysterious revelation – of the secret but powerful and loving purposes of God, who saved not only them but the whole world.²

But we don't like the sound of suffering and humility. Some will say “Who needs a god like that? We want a real triumph. We want to be heroes. We don't want any suffering; we don't want any pain, so we're not interested thank you very much.”

² Wright, *Reflecting*, p.78 (adapted)

But there are many others who see it differently. They recognize that here is found a depth, a power, a reality; something *authentic*. In our apparent suffering, dying and strange revival, we reveal to people the true life and love of God.³

Paul reveals the mark of genuine Christian authenticity. Some of us sometimes talk as if life were simply a matter of glory, of celebration, of the Lord providing all our needs and everything going forward without a hitch. Nobody actually lives like that all the time, of course, and the effort to go on believing it in the face of the evidence can produce a double life, with all the dangers of hypocrisy and shallowness.

Equally, some people – including some Christians – react so forcibly to a grinning, shallow, falsely cheerful spirituality that they make out that everything is gloomy and filled with trouble, a constant round of difficulty and frustration.

Christian maturity gets the balance right. Part of the task of being a Christian is being able to grieve and celebrate at the same time, to share both the pain and joy of the world, and indeed the tears and laughter of God.⁴

In a small way our gathering today/tonight reflects that reality, that balance, as we can simultaneously lament what Covid has taken from us and what we can't do as a result, all the while celebrating what we do have and what we are permitted to do.

Perhaps we here today/tonight are at risk of virtue signaling. This phrase has risen in prominence in the last few years. "Virtue signaling" refers to a conspicuous expression of moral correctness or good character, when it is believed that the statement or action is superficial or empty. It is used when those making a moral pronouncement seem to value appearance over action; when they seem to think it will garner approval rather than because they actually believe in and are committed to what they are saying.

I was fascinated to find that the term "virtue signaling" in fact has earlier origins in academia, in religious anthropology for example. In this context "virtue signaling" was not used a pejorative term. It is theorized that costly religious rituals which

³ Wright, *Reflecting*, p.16 (adapted)

⁴ Wright, *Reflecting*, pp.69-70 (adapted)

cannot on their face be explained in terms of evolution or economics may make sense when signaling is considered. Placing a significant portion of one's wealth, food or other resource into some shrine; undergoing painful or dangerous rituals as forms of worship; devoting considerable amounts of time to apparently non-productive endeavour such as prayer and chanting... : these kinds of things don't fit with the explanations of evolutionary anthropology or behavioural economics and the like. The theory is that such costly public rituals act as hard-to-fake signals of commitment.

Regardless of the merits or otherwise of that theory, I think it provides a really useful signpost to the whole point of what we do today/tonight.

It is, after all, an ashen *cross* that we wear. At the same time as we acknowledge our shared human fallibility, we also identify ourselves with the very costly action of God in Jesus' death for us on the cross. And at the same time we declare that, unworthy though we are, God has met us in our need and declares those who claim his promises clean and free from condemnation. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church,

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We are signed with the cross, and declare again our commitment to follow the costly way of Christ our Lord.

As we today make the small step of obedience and humility to accept this visible sign of the ashes, may we continue to make the daily steps of obedience and humility, laying ourselves open to the transforming work of Christ. In doing so we look beyond the ephemerality of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" and look forward to the day when we will rise with him and then continue to serve the living God in his new creation.

Sources

- <https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-management/the-quest-for-authenticity-1460>
- Tom Wright, *Reflecting the Glory: Bible readings and reflections for Lent and Easter*, Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 1997.
- Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, London: SPCK,
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/20/virtue-signalling-putdown-passed-sell-by-date>
- <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/07/the-awful-rise-of-virtue-signalling/>
- <https://www.quora.com/What-is-virtue-signaling-What-are-some-examples-Is-it-good-or-bad>
- “Ashes”, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*
- Keener, *Matthew*, IVP NT Commentary Series
- “Ash Wednesday” Wikipedia
- “Ash Wednesday” The Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01775b.htm>
- Wright, *Surprised by Hope*
- + Richard Chartres (London), “Getting into the Rhythm of Lent”, <http://old.shipoffools.com/Cargo/Features99/Features/Lent99.html>
- Hoffacker, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_82381_ENG_HTM.htm
- Pumpkin Cottage Ministries, <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyg/ashwednesdayg.html>

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

6 'Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²'So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵'And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

¹⁶'When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

¹⁹'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.