

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Dust & Ashes

What is this Wednesday all about? I can tell you one thing: it is something that appears to concern a lot of young people who don't go out of their way to "do religion" in the ordinary way. Their presence in large numbers at the University Mass on Ash Wednesday has always struck me as a complete anomaly. The symbolism obviously speaks to them quite deeply, and because it isn't an immediately attractive theme, it's all the more remarkable that it should.

The Message Of The Day

When the ashes are smeared on the foreheads of the congregation, the priest is invited to say to them one of two formulae: the "revised" form is *Repent, and believe the good news*; the ancient one, *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return*. I find it hard as a priest to choose between these two, and usually find myself saying them both alternately. *Repent* is one of my favourite words, because it's about building a new mind, and I don't think that's a thing we only do rarely; I think indeed that it's a habit of life to be endlessly revising, endlessly re-opening the record, re-thinking past decisions and opinions, and - I hope - slowly eliminating prejudice, negativity, narrowness and pessimism. If there's good news to be had, then in heaven's name let us have it, and believe in it while we still have our hands in the till and our irons in the fire. Lent has a certain knowledge that it won't always be so, and that we ought to use time well; and much of that feeling is embodied in the old form of words for this day, about our being dust: the stark words of Wilfred Owen, contemplating the dead body of a fellow-soldier, come to mind: *Was it for this that clay grew tall?* It's a sombre message, but we need reality if our hope is going to be real. The worst *possibility* has to be subjected to whatever hope we trust in, otherwise our hope doesn't deserve the name.

Serious Joy

Jesus Christ, God and Man - the object of our believing - has the good news we need to cope with being dust. His being man with us makes him a sharer in our dustiness, and his divine life changes the meaning of the word *human* into something that cannot be killed. This explosive encounter is what gives Ash Wednesday its unique power. It speaks to our

worst and our highest reality in one solemn moment; instead of the switchback experience of smash and volley that makes up most of our life, we can face up to the worst, whilst holding on hard to the greatness which God has promised us, and to which we sense we ought to aspire.

Human Aspiration

Human hope has been expressed in countless lives, and always has about it the beauty and pity that come from desire and its failure to reach fulfilment. What makes Christianity so powerful is that in Christ all human hopes are fulfilled and guaranteed. None of us knows how this will come about. But it flows directly from our faith in God the Creator that we should believe this. The first line of Lent is there for us: *Lord, you are merciful to all, and hate nothing you have made: you overlook our sins to bring us to repentance. You are the Lord our God*. We get so far away from this knowledge, that we even begin to doubt its truth: people begin to think that God has made them evil, hateful, monstrous. They adopt some twisted view of themselves, become lost in some shortened self-image, and feel trapped in a life that is certain to be grim and frustrated. Such a view is the absolute opposite of the Lenten line above, and its secret enthronement in the hearts of human beings causes them to live in despair, and to die in violence.

God's Joy In His Creation

Not one of us is excluded from the stunning truth that we are made for God's purposes, and for nothing less. If we think we would have been better made some other way, that we could have been put together more wisely, then we have yet to sustain the force of believing in the Creator God. He makes nothing in vain, and never repents of what he makes. The repentance - changing our mind and heart - are for us, not for God: and now - Lent - is the time to do it. Because we are a source of divine joy to God, each of us, and equally so, because he is God and not a partial human being; his relationship as Creator is as supremely free and joyous in any one of us, as it is in the greatest of us. Lent invites us to come home to that joy, and to put aside all alternative ways of looking, thinking, or feeling about ourselves and the world. Let's do it!

Fr Philip