

“Ash Wednesday Reflection”

Ecclesiastes 7:1-4

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Yesterday was Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday. People all around the world got in their last bit of revelry before the austere days of the Lenten calendar. Although, I wonder how many of those on Bourbon street are beginning spiritual disciplines this morning. My guess is that there are many who are considering a change of lifestyle...at least for a day or two.

Living like there is no tomorrow, *carpe diem*, seize the day...a great theme that has been lifted up by both poets and preachers. However, it is usually an idea that comes to mean satisfy all your desires because you may die at any moment. It often leads to a self-centered, reckless, race to the death. Certainly, most of the folks on Bourbon St last night were living like there was no tomorrow and I have no doubt that it was a good time. This is not going to be a sermon about the evils of careless drinking and smoking. It is about death, though.

An unknown 14th century monk wrote a letter in response to another monk who was concerned about the nature of his prayers. He writes:

“Let me start by saying that the best thing you can do when you start to pray, however long or short your time of prayer may be, is to tell yourself, and mean it, that you are going to die at the end of your prayer. I am not joking when I tell you this...”

Perhaps the author of Ecclesiastes also had a sense of the need to keep death before us. He urges us to consider that the day of death is more important than the day of birth. Better to go to a house of mourning than the house of feasting. Sorrow better than laughter. Sure sounds like a depressing way to live. This is the same person who commends us to “Eat, drink, and be merry.”

There is a man named Mark I visit every now and then. His body is failing him. He can't get out of the house. He used to be an athlete. Now he can't get out of his chair. He knows he will die. The last time I visited him he said to me with a big smile on his face, “Paul, when God takes something from you, you begin to be thankful for what you have. If I wake up, I thank God. If I can still hear, I thank God. If I can still taste food, I thank God. I used to take everything for granted because I never thought I could lose anything. I lived life however I felt like. I never thanked God for anything.” He lives with the knowledge that he will die, but that he is in the hands of a God that loves him dearly. Perhaps he benefits from my visits, but I benefit more. I get to see a smiling, dying man and know that God is not absent when we suffer.

Ash Wednesday is a day that we convince ourselves that we will die. We place ashes on our head to recognize that in the end our bodies will be nothing more than ashes...reduced to carbon...no greater than the dirt we walk on. However, those ashes

are in the form of a cross to remind us that the Son of God came to share in our earthly suffering and ultimately in our death, in order for God to share his heavenly joy and heavenly life.

We too must be willing to go where Jesus went, towards suffering and death. Shane Claiborne, one of the leaders of community called the Simple Life located in inner city Philadelphia, says he is often asked if he is scared to live in such a dangerous part of town. His response is , “We are more scared of the suburbs. Jesus warns that we can fear those things, which can hurt our bodies, or those things, which can destroy our souls, but we should be more fearful of the latter. Those are the subtle demons of suburbia.” Shane’s mother says, “Perhaps there is no more dangerous place for a Christian to be than in safety and comfort, detached from the suffering of others.”

As we begin this journey towards cross, joining Jesus, let us be open to living in a place that does not necessarily give us comfort or security. Let us not only seek the pleasures of life, but also be willing to enter into a world that mourns and suffers and dies. For this is the world where we will find Jesus at work. And this is the world that doesn’t end in death, it begins with it. Lent goes through Good Friday, but it ends with Easter. And so let us follow our Savior on the journey, keeping death before us, trusting that life is on the other side smiling through this dying world.