

Ash Wednesday, 2016

Flannery O'Connor, one of the finest Christian fiction writers of the twentieth century, wrote short stories that were described as grotesque. Awful things happened in them, awful characters peopled them. Beautifully and realistically written, they were not appropriate for polite conversation. Someone asked her why her purportedly Christian stories were so bizarre and unpleasant. And she responded that when you are speaking to the hard of hearing, you have to shout.

I think that something like this is the only justification for what we are about to do. We have just read passages from Isaiah and from Matthew that advise rather strongly against the imposition of ashes and public acts of avowed penitence. Isaiah tells us that God doesn't care about messing around with ashes, but wants us to do justice and care for the poor and hungry. In Matthew Jesus tells us not to disfigure our faces when fasting, but to repent, give alms, and fast in private. It's almost as if the crafters of the lectionary—the calendar that determines when we read what Bible passages—handed over the planning of Ash Wednesday readings to some theologian or denomination who particularly hates the liturgy of Ash Wednesday.

So how on earth do we have the guts to read these passages and then immediately flout them? I think there's an element of just warning us about the dangers of what we're doing. Penitence without justice is empty and receiving ashes without giving out bread and clothing is wicked. So how do we dare risk it? I think we dare risk it because in our culture it takes something rather bold, bizarre, and grotesque to focus on our attention on the themes of today.

It is often said that Ash Wednesday is the most honest day of the Christian year, because it is the day when we face up to those unpalatable facts of death and sin. I'm not totally sure about this because I refuse to believe that resurrection is any less real than death; and I am totally convinced that forgiveness is more real than sin. I think that it's not so much that we deny the reality of these two things—death and sin—as it is that we spend so much of our lives trying to make ourselves invulnerable to them.

Tonight's liturgy, with its crazy ritual of imposing ashes on our heads and its very long litany of penitence are exercises to remind us that no matter how hard we try, we are finally vulnerable to both of them. Now, trying to stay alive, resisting the forces of death, and hoping always to be growing in righteousness (and thus avoiding becoming a notorious sinner) are good Christian things. But longevity is not the point of life and dodging blame is not the point of morality. Tonight we make sure that neither our reputations nor our longevity has become an idol.

Ash Wednesday is a very honest day not because otherwise we would never think about sin and death—not because it's the crazy uncle with no filter who brings up unpleasant things at every opportunity. It is an honest day because it calls us to be honest with ourselves. To take our blinders off, to come to our senses, to see the ways that through no effort of our own, we have become entangled in evil and injustice. To remember that none of us gets out of here alive. And to do this, to see this, takes something a little out of the ordinary. Like having ashes smeared on your head, like repenting of a very long list of things that you aren't quite sure you did.

Finally, though, Ash Wednesday is not the point. Today is just the beginning of Lent, which is just preparation for Easter. We reckon with death so that we're ready for resurrection. We repent of sin to make it easier for us to accept redemption. It's kind of gloomy, but it's finally just fastidious preparation for the greatest feast.